WDL

No.25

Zane Grey's WESTERN

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ZANE GREY G. EZRA DANE & BEATRICE J. DANE

S. OMAR BARKER WALKER A. TOMPKINS

As Jocelyn whipped up his gun, Molly stepped in front of him, shielding Jim.

The Drift Fence Chap. 20

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NOVEL (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

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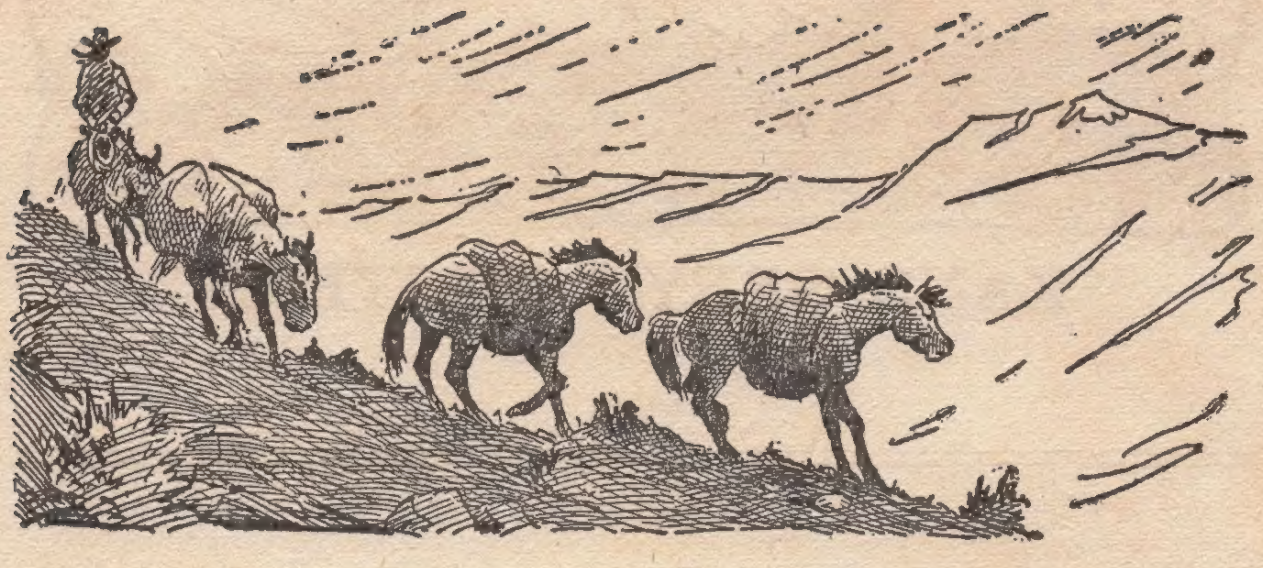

The Drift Fence

By ZANE GREY

Chapter One

Hard Times Ahead

MOLLY DUNN sat waiting on the rickety old porch of Enoch Summers's store in the village of West Fork. For once she was oblivious to the approach of the lean-faced, long-legged young backwoodsmen who lounged there with their elders.

Molly was almost 18 and on the eve of a great adventure. She had been invited to ride to Flagerstown with the Sees. She had been there once some years before and the memory had haunted her. In her pocket she had money to buy new stockings and shoes, which compensated somewhat for the fact that she carefully kept her feet and ankles hidden under the bench. She wore her good dress and bonnet, and though not satisfied with them she was not ashamed.

Andy Stoneham, a tall youth with sallow face and fuzzy beard, edged over closer and closer. "Reckon you 're orful stuck up this mawnin'," he drawled. "Goin' up to Flag, huh?"

"Do you think I'd dress up like this for West Fork?" inquired Molly loftily.

Andy asked bluntly, "Didn't I take you to the last dance in thet dress?"

"Did you?"

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"Wal, I shore did. An' didn't I hug you in it?"

"Did you?" queried Molly flippantly.

"Wal, how aboot kissin' you, too? Drivin' home from the dance?"

"Oh, did you!" retorted Molly, her face hot. Andy's voice carried rather far. "An' what did I do?"

"Wal, I figger thet you kissed me back an' then slapped my face."

"Andy Stoneham, you're a liar about that first."

"Haw! Haw! Say, Molly, there's goin' to be a dance next week at Hall's Mill. Come on an' go."

"Andy, I don't like that place," returned Molly regretfully. "Besides, I wouldn't go with you, anyway."

"Wal, you shore air gettin' stuck up. An' why not?"

"Because of what you said — about kissin' me."

"Wal, why should I care? You've shore been mean to me."

"Why should you, indeed?" replied Molly coldly, and turned away.

At that juncture a horseman rode up and his advent not only interrupted the argument but had a quieting effect upon the other occupants of the porch. He was a lean range rider, neither young nor old, and he fitted the hard country. His horse showed the dust and strain of long travel.

"Howdy, Seth," said old Enoch Summers, rubbing his bristled chin and stepping out. " 'Pears like you been humpin' it along. Whar you come from?"

"Me an' Arch Dunn just rode over from the Diamond," replied the other.

Molly's attention quickened to interest at the mention of her brother. Seth Haverly was his boon companion and they had been up to something.

"Wal, thar's news stickin' out all over you," drawled Summers.

"Reckon so."

One by one the men on the porch joined Summers.

Haverly had a still brown face and intent light eyes. "Enoch, you know thet drift fence we been hearin' aboot for the last year?" he asked.

"Reckon I heerd the talk."

"Wal, it's more'n talk now. Me an' Arch rode along it, for ten miles, I figger. Straight as a beeline. New three-wire fence, an' barbed at thet!"

"What you say? Barbed!"

"You bet."

Silence greeted Seth's nonchalant affirmative.

"Arch had a hunch aboot this fence goin' up," went on Haverly. "An' in Flag we found it was a fact."

"Wal, who's buildin' it?"

"Traft."

"Ahuh. He could afford it. Wal, what's his idee?"

"It ain't very flatterin' to West Fork," drawled Seth, with a grin. "We heerd some things thet'd be hard for you old cattle nesters to swaller, if they're true. But me an' Arch only had the word of some cowpunchers. We couldn't get any satisfaction from Traft's outfit. New foreman. Nephew from Missouri, we heerd. Tenderfoot, but I agree with Arch, who said he was no fool. Anyway, we asked him polite like: 'Say, mister, what's the idee of this drift fence?' — An' he looked me an' Arch over an' said, 'What do you suppose the idee is?' "

"Short an' sweet!" ejaculated a man standing beside Summers. "Wal, you two-bit free-range cattlemen can put thet in your pipes an' smoke it."

"Me an' Arch was sure curious aboot this fence," continued Seth. "We rode out of Flag an' started in where the fence begins. It strikes south into the timber at Traft's line, an' closes up every draw clear to the Diamond. At Limestone we hit into Traft's outfit. They've got the job half done an' by the time the snow flies thet drift fence will run clear from Flag to Black Butte."

"Ha! A hundred miles of drift fence!" exclaimed some one.

"Ahuh," nodded Summers sagely. "An' all the cattle will drift along to Black Butte an' then drift back again."

Haverly swung his spurred boot back to his stirrup and without another word rode away.

Then down the road from the other direction appeared the See buckboard, sight of which brought Molly bouncing to her feet.

"Hop up, Molly," called See gayly. "We're late an' it ain't no fault of yours."

"Good mawnin'," returned Molly brightly, as she climbed to the seat beside Mrs. See.

"Mornin', lass," replied the rancher's wife. "You look like you could fly as well as hop."

"Oh, I'm on pins," cried Molly. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Howdy, Caleb," spoke up Summers. "Reckon you've got time to come inside a minute."

"Mawnin', Enoch," replied See, nodding to the others present. "I'm in a hurry."

"Wal, come in anyhow," returned Summers bluntly, and went into the store.

See grumbled a little, as he wound the reins around the brake-handle, and laboriously got down. He was a heavy man, no longer young. All the loungers on the porch followed him into the store, but Andy Stoneham remained in the door, watching Molly.

"That lout's makin' sheep eyes at you, Molly," said Mrs. See.

Molly did not look. "He just said some nasty things to me," she confided. "Then the fool asked me to go to a dance at Hall's Mill."

Caleb See came stamping out of the store, wiping his beard, sober of face where he had been merry. Without a word he stepped into the buckboard, making it lurch, and drove away.

"Mrs. See, while I was waitin' for you Seth Haverly rode up," said Molly. "He'd just come in from the Diamond with my brother Arch. They'd been to Flag. An' he was tellin' old Enoch Summers about a fence that was bein' built, down across the country. A drift fence, he called it. What's a drift fence?"

Caleb answered, "Wal, lass, it's no wonder you ask, seein' we don't have no fences in this country. On a free range cattle travel all over, accordin' to water an' grass. Now a drift fence is somethin' that changes a free range. It ain't free no more. It's a rough country this side of the Diamond. All the draws head up on top an' run down into the West Fork, an' into the Cibeque. Water runs down these draws, an' feed is good. Wal, a drift fence built on top an' runnin' from Flag down country will keep the cattle on top. They'll drift along an' water down on the other side. Then they'll drift back."

"Why were they so serious about it?" asked Molly curiously. "Isn't a drift fence a good thing?"

"Reckon it is, for Traft an' Blodgett, an' the big cattlemen up Flag way. But for us folks, who live off the Diamond, it ain't so good."

"Most of us couldn't live much worse," replied Molly thoughtfully.

"You bet you could, lass. Haven't you always had milk an' beefsteak, an' shoes to wear?"

"Most always, but not always. Just now I'm walkin' in my bare toes," said Molly with a giggle. "If I hadn't saved up money enough to buy stockings an' shoes I'd never come."

Mr. See went on: "No, Molly, we've been fair to middlin' prosperous down here in the valley. But this drift fence will make a difference."

"Caleb, isn't the land owned by the government? Couldn't any man homestead it?" his wife asked.

"Shore. An' there's the rub. Traft has no right to fence this free range. But he's a rich, powerful old duffer an' bullheaded as one of his steers. Who're we down here to go to law? An' where'd we go? Fairfield, the county seat, is farther away than Flag. It takes time an' money to travel."

"Oh, dear!" sighed the good woman. "Then it'll mean hard times."

"Wal, Susan, we can stand hard times, an' I reckon come out ahead. But this drift fence means trouble."

"What kind of trouble, Uncle Caleb?" queried Molly soberly.

"Lass, do you remember the Pleasant Valley war over across the mountains in the Tonto?"

"Yes, I remember. Ma wouldn't let me play out of the yard. We lived at Lunden then. But if I hadn't remembered I'd sure know what that war was. Pa talks about it yet."

"Ahuh. Lass, some people say your dad was crippled for sympathy to one faction in that fight."

"Pa denies it. But he was on the side of the sheepmen. An' that riles my brother Arch somethin' funny. They never get along. Arch isn't much good, Uncle Caleb."

"Humph! I'd not say that, for Arch has good parts. But he's much bad, an' that's no joke. Wal, if Traft's outfit ever finishes their fence — at least down in the Diamond, it'll be cut. An' as Traft runs a lot of hardridin' an' shootin' cowpunchers, there's shore goin' to be blood spilled. It takes years sometimes to wear out these feuds. An' we've a lot of thick-headed hombres in our neck of the woods."

Molly conceived a resentment against the rich cattleman who could impose such restrictions and embitter the lives of poor people. And as for Traft's tenderfoot relative, who had come out from Missouri to run a hard outfit and build barbed-wire fences, Molly certainly hated him.

It had been years since Molly had been so many miles from the village. She did not remember the road. Only a lone horseman was encountered in all the 15 miles down to where the West Fork poured its white torrent into the Cibeque.

Here Mr. See took the main road, which climbed and wound and zigzagged up the long slope. Molly looked down and back at the wilderness which was her home. She felt that it would take a terrible break to sever her from this home of forest and gorge.

Chapter Two

Cattle King

FROM the head of the Cibeque the road wound through undulating forest land, heading the deep draws and glens, and gradually ascending to the zone of cedar and pinon which marked the edge of the cattle range. Several ranches were passed at any one of which See would have been welcome to spend the night, but he kept going all of daylight, and by night had covered more than half the journey to Flagerstown.

"Wal, wife, we've made Keech's, an' that's good, considerin' our late start," remarked See, with satisfaction, as he drove into a wide clearing, the hideousness of which attested to the presence of an old sawmill. Rude clapboard cabins and fences, not to note the barking dogs, gave evidence of habitation.

The cabins, however, were more inviting inside, Molly was to learn, and that the widow Keech was a most kindly and loquacious hostess.

"So this hyar is John Dunn's girl growed up," said Mrs. Keech. "I knowed your father well, an' I seen you when you was a big-eyed kid. Now you're a woman ridin' to Flag."

Molly was keen to listen, and during the dinner hour heard much about Flagerstown and the fair to begin there on the morrow, and to end on Saturday with a rodeo. Mrs. See had not imparted all this marvelous news to Molly and she laughed at the girl's excitement.

"What you know aboot this drift fence?" finally asked See.

"Caleb, it's a downright fact," replied the widow forcefully. "Harry has seen it. Traft's outfit are camped ten miles north of us. They'll pass here this summer an' be down on your Diamond by the time snow flies."

"Ahuh. So we heerd. But what's your idee aboot it?"

"Wal, Caleb, all things considered, it'll be good for the range. For no matter what folks say, cattle rustlin' is not a thing of the past. Two-bit stealin' of calves is what it really is. But rustlin', for all that. An' up this way, anyhow, it'll help."

Molly listened to hear everything, and particularly wanted to learn more about the young Missouri tenderfoot. To her disappointment, no more was said about the drift fence.

"Wal, we'll rustle off to bed," concluded See. "Mrs. Keech, I'll want to leave early in the mornin'."

Molly was tired, but not sleepy. Perhaps the bed was too comfortable. Anyway, she lay wide awake in the dark, wondering what was going to happen to her.

When at last she fell asleep it seemed only a moment until she was rudely awakened. Mrs. See was up, dressing by lamplight. A gray darkness showed outside the open window, and the air that blew in on Molly was cold enough for early fall, down on the West Fork.

But the great day was at hand. When she came out from breakfast, a clear cold morning, with rosy flush in the east, greeted her triumphantly, as if to impart that it had some magic in store.

Then they were off behind fresh horses and soon into the cedars. Before long, they came to the open top

of a ridge and Molly saw a gray, dim, speckled world of range, so immense as to dwarf her sight. This open range took her breath.

"Wal, lass, thar's the smoke of Flag," said Mrs. See. "Way down in the corner. Long ways yet. But we're shore gettin' there."

Ten miles out of Flagerstown, Mr. See pointed to a distant ridgetop, across which a new fence strung, startlingly clear against the sky. It gave Molly a pang.

"Traft's drift fence, I reckon," said See. "An' I'd almost rather have this a sheep range!"

For all her poor memory, Molly remembered Flagerstown—the black timbered mountain above it, the sawmill with its pile of yellow lumber, the gray cottages on the outskirts, and at last the thrilling long main street, with buildings that looked wonderful to her. Mr. See remarked with satisfaction that the time was not much past four o'clock.

"Hyar we are," said Mr. See, halting before a pretentious brick building. "This is the new hotel, Molly. Now, wife, make the best of our good trip in. Take Molly in the stores. I'll look after the horses, get our rooms, an' meet you hyar at six o'clock."

Three hours later, Molly, radiant and laden with bundles, tagged into the hotel behind Mrs. See, likewise laden, to be greeted vociferously by Mr. See.

"For the land's sake! Have you robbed a store or been to a fire?—An' hyar me waitin' for supper!"

"Caleb, it happens seldom in a lifetime," replied his beaming wife. "Help us pack this outfit to our rooms."

Molly had a room of her own. She had never even seen one like it.

There she unpacked the numerous bundles and parcels, and laid out her newly acquired possessions upon the bed. How quickly her little hoard of money had vanished! Still, it had gone farther than she had anticipated. Mrs. See had been incredibly generous. A blue print dress, a white dress with slippers and stockings to match, the prettiest little hat Molly had ever seen in her life, ribbons and gloves and what not—these had been the expansion of the good woman's promise.

But not only the pleasure of looking and buying had Molly to recall. She had met more people than she had ever met before. She had been asked to serve in one of the booths at the fair. One of the storekeepers had offered her a position as clerk in his dry-goods department. And altogether the summing up of this day left Molly staggered with happiness.

Another morning probed deeper into Molly's faculties for enjoyment and wonder. Mrs. See had relatives and friends in Flagerstown, and they made much of the girl. Not the least of that morning's interest was a look at Jim Traft, cattle king of the range. It was in the bank, where Molly and Mrs. See had visited with Mr. See.

"Thar's the old reprobate," whispered See to Molly. "Jim Traft, who's fencin' off West Fork from the range!"

Molly stared. She saw a big man in his shirt sleeves and dusty top boots. He had a shrewd weatherbeaten face, hard round the mouth and chin, but softened somewhat by

bright blue eyes that certainly did not miss Molly.

As they turned to go out he hailed See. "Hey, don't I know you?"

"Well, I reckon I know you, Traft," returned See, not over-civilly. "I'm Caleb See."

"Shore. I never forget faces. You live down in the Cibeque. Glad to meet you again. If you're not in a hurry I'd like to ask you some questions about your neck of the woods."

"Glad to accommodate you, Traft," returned See, and then he indicated his companions. "Meet my wife—An' this is our little friend, Molly Dunn. Her first visit to Flag since she was a kid."

Traft shook hands with Mrs. See, and likewise with Molly. He was genial, and his keen eyes approved of Molly. "Wal, wal! I'm shore glad to meet you, young lady," he said. "Molly Dunn of the Cibeque. I think I used to know your father. An' this is your first visit to Flag in a long time?"

"Yes, sir. It seems a whole lifetime," replied Molly.

When Molly got outside again she exclaimed, breathlessly: "Oh, Mrs. See, he looked right through me! I don't want his pity—but I'm afraid the Dunns of the Cibeque have a bad name."

"Reckon they have, Molly dear," rejoined Mrs. See practically. "But so far as you are concerned it can be lived down."

"But, Mrs. See—I'd have to stick to Dad an' Arch," said Molly, suddenly confronted with a lamentable fact.

"Shore. In a way you've got to. I wouldn't think much of anyone who couldn't stand by her own kin."

Not until afternoon on the ride out to the fairgrounds did Molly quite forget Jim Traft's look and the ignominy of the Dunns.

Quite by magic, it seemed, she found herself separated from the smiling Mrs. See and conducted to a gayly decorated booth. There she was introduced to a girl about her own age, with whom she was to share the fascinating work of serving the public with sandwiches and coffee. Fortunately for Molly, her partner was nice and friendly.

Under her amiable instruction Molly acquitted herself creditably. But she could not get used to the marvelous gown she had on, and was in a panic for fear she might get a stain upon it. She did not, however, have so much work that she could not see what was going on, and presently she was having a perfectly wonderful time.

Once she served three cowboys. She had never seen such brilliant scarves and fancy belts. She noticed, too, that these young men, like Arch and Seth, packed guns in their belts, a custom she had hardly expected to find at a fair. One of them made eyes at her.

After a while they came back, when Molly's partner had left, and if ever Molly had seen the devil in the eyes of a youth she saw it in one of these customers. Still, he was not bad-looking.

"Miss—Miss—what'd you say your name was?" he asked as he straddled the bench before the counter.

"I didn't say," replied Molly.

"Oh, *ex*—cuse me. My mistake," he returned, crestfallen at the subdued glee of his comrades. "Have you any pop?"

"No," replied Molly, "only coffee an' sandwiches an' cake."

"Cake? Well, give us cake an' coffee," ordered the cowboy.

She served them swiftly and discreetly, deftly avoiding the bold hand that sought to include her fingers as she passed a cup.

"Do you live here?" he asked presently.

"You know quite well I'm a stranger in Flag, else you wouldn't be so impertinent," returned Molly severely.

"Aw!" He subsided with that exclamation. And his comrades proceeded to enjoy themselves at his expense. Evidently the bold one enjoyed something of a reputation as a lady-killer, and had at last met defeat. Presently, as he could not get Molly to notice him, and grew tired of listening to his friends, he threw some silver on the counter and said loftily, "Keep the change, Little Snowflake." Then he strode away, and after a few moments the others followed.

From this time Molly was kept busy, and only gradually did it dawn upon her that a string of cowboys kept coming and going, for the very obvious reason of getting a look at her. More than once she heard the name Snowflake. Still, none of them was rude. Molly enjoyed it hugely.

Soon she was relieved by the young lady, Miss Price, who shared the booth with her.

"You've got the boys guessing," said this smiling worthy. "They've nagged me to death. I don't know them all, though. Just keep it up."

"I—I don't do anythin' but wait on them," gasped Molly.

"That's it. Guess they think you're cold when you're only shy," went on Miss Price. "But you can have a heap of fun. Keep on freezing them. Tomorrow night you'll have the time of your life."

"Tomorrow night?" faltered Molly.

"Sure. Big dance after the rodeo. Didn't my mother tell you? Anyway, you're going with us."

"I—I hadn't heard. It's terrible kind of you. But I really couldn't go. I'm such a stranger. An' if they —they think—"

"You dear kid! You are going. Mrs. See promised mother."

Chapter Three

The Young Stranger

IT WAS Saturday afternoon and the rodeo had just begun, which accounted for the deserted appearance of the adjacent grounds. Molly had remained longer than was really necessary. Mrs. See would be waiting for her at the stand. She was about to leave when she saw that she was to have a last customer.

A young man in overalls and heavy boots got off a dusty horse and approached the booth. He asked for something to eat and drink. Apparently he took no notice of Molly. His face wore a troubled look.

He might have been 22 or 23 years old and evidently was not a cowboy. Molly judged that he would have been fair-skinned if he had not been so sunburned. Presently he laid his sombrero on the counter, which act

disclosed light wavy hair, and a broad brow marred by deep furrows.

He slowly drank the last of his coffee, and looking up, met Molly's glance. Then she knew he had not seen her before. He had gray eyes full of shadows.

"What'd you do if you were just about licked?" he queried suddenly.

"Sir?" exclaimed Molly.

He repeated the question, this time more deliberately, as if now he weighed it.

"I—I'd get up an' fight some more," declared Molly, surprised into genuine sincerity.

He smiled. "You would? Suppose then you got licked sure?"

"It wouldn't make no difference," replied Molly, at last forgetting to watch her speech. And she smiled back at him.

He saw her really then as a girl. Leaning his elbows on the counter, he regarded her with interest verging upon admiration. "Very well. I'll take your hunch. I'll not quit. If they lick me—I should say, *when* they lick me, I'll get up and fight some more."

His words were severe, his purpose almost grim, yet Molly realized the best compliment she ever had received was being paid her.

"I haven't heard, but of course there'll be a dance tonight. And you'll be going?"

Molly nodded. She had begun to be conscious of confusing sensations.

"I don't care for these town dances," he said. "But I'm going to this one—if you're not engaged for every dance."

"To tell the truth I—I haven't one single dance yet," she replied.

"Well! Then your best fellow isn't here?"

"He doesn't happen to exist," said Molly wistfully.

"Listen. This is a serious matter," he rejoined gravely. "Young ladies aren't always to be believed."

"I wouldn't lie to anyone," retorted Molly.

"Honest! You haven't a best fellow?"

"I haven't *any* fellow," replied Molly, blushing rosily. "I'm only seventeen. Did you think me as old as Methuselah?"

"Your age hadn't occurred to me. But I'd have taken you for nineteen, anyhow. Will you dance with me tonight?"

"Yes."

"How many times?"

"I—I don't know about that. You see, I'm not used to city dances."

"Oh, it'd be quite proper, if that worries you. You see *I* might be taken for your best fellow. I'd sure like that—Would you?"

"It'd not be terribly disagreeable to me," said Molly archly, and after a roguish glance she looked away.

But his response to that was different from what she might have expected. "Thank you," he rejoined, and stood up, with his gray eyes alight. "Save some dances for me. Good-by, Miss Cibeque."

He strode away and led his horse in the direction of the corrals. Molly stood there tingling, to be disturbed by the arrival of Mrs. See.

"I had one last customer," said Molly, as if apologizing for the delay.

"Child, everythin' closed at one. The rodeo is on," returned Mrs. See. "Hurry now, but don't forget the cash. We'll turn that over to Mrs. Price. You've been a success, Molly. An' I'm tickled."

They hurried into the crowded stand, where some one had kept seats for them; and straightway Molly became absorbed in her first rodeo. After that, time meant nothing.

"Wal, lass, an' how'd you like it?" asked Mr. See.

"I've had the most wonderful time in all my life," dreamily replied Molly.

"With the best yet to come," added Mrs. See. "This is all very well for the men, but it's the dance where the girl shines."

With that remark there came flashing back to Molly the strange thoughts and sensations roused by her last customer at the booth.

This perturbing state of mind got sidetracked at the hotel. Molly was thrown in contact with women whom the Sees knew, and at dinner they sat with friends, so that Molly was not able to think for herself until she got to her room. There anticipation and delight assailed her again, into which crept a dread of she knew not what.

Then she spread the white gown and accessories out on the bed, to revel in them, and forget the proximity of catastrophe. The following hour was one of exultation and dismay combined. She fixed her hair this way and that, never satisfied. It was an apparition which stared wide-eyed at her from the mirror. Who was this girl? Her arms and shoulders were bare. She could not get over the feeling of being still undressed.

When Mrs. See came in, to exclaim in raptures over her, then Molly's last vestige of sense went into eclipse. She needed to be scolded and reminded that she was only

Molly Dunn of the Cibeque, instead of being lauded to the skies, and told not one of the society girls at St. Louis, where Mrs. See had once been, could hold a candle to her.

"Upon your haid be it!" murmured Molly.

And so they went out to the dance, which was held in the town hall, a few blocks from the hotel. They walked, and Molly trod on air. Inside the hall was a goodly assembly, among whom were Mrs. Price, her daughter Ellen, and an awkward son about Molly's age. They at once appropriated Molly, and this perhaps was the time of greatest strain for her. It was scarcely necessary, however, for Molly to remember Mrs. See's injunctions. She scarcely had a voice at all. Fortunately, she was too little and dainty to be clumsy, and shyness only added to her charm.

There was a good deal of standing around, talking and waiting, with introductions in order, while slowly the hall filled comfortably. Then the music began and it was not a fiddle sawed by a backwoodsman, but real music, and Molly could have danced in leaden boots.

Then, after the fourth, when she was standing with a group near the entrance of the hall, she saw him. She felt herself tremble. He wore black and looked tall and slim. His eager eyes, dark with excitement, swept the hall. Molly knew what they were searching for. She had

never wanted anything so badly as for him to see her, yet she was afraid. He did see her. His smile and bow came before he had time to look her over. Then Molly's cup grew perilously full.

At the end of the next number, which Molly had with young Price, she claimed to be a little tired and wanted to sit down.

"Shall I take you across to Mother?" asked young Price.

"No, thanks. I'll wait here for my next partner," replied Molly graciously.

"Excuse me then," he returned, and left her.

Molly hoped her stranger would be quick. But she had scarcely prepared herself for his sudden arrival.

"Is this mine?" he asked, bending over her eagerly.

"Yes," murmured Molly, rising.

Then he whirled her into the throng. His presence did not quite make her oblivious to his strong arm, his light step, his perfect time.

"I was afraid you'd forgotten me," he said, pressing her hand.

"Don't talk," returned Molly.

He laughed and obeyed her. Molly's head came about to his shoulder and she just escaped contact with it. Not that she wished to! She felt that her face must be burning and she would have liked to hide it there. She did not seem to be making any effort to dance. Yet she was whirling, swaying, gliding around among dancers who looked vague and dim.

The music ceased when they were at the farther end of the hall.

"Come. Let's get out before some of them grab you," he said. "I must talk to you."

Chapter Four

Revelation

HE LED her out through a corridor to a long porch, high up over a garden. It appeared deserted and shadowy. There was moonlight at the corner and just at the edge of it a bench. He found a seat for her there.

"You look perfectly lovely," he said, expelling a deep breath, as if in relief. "I just didn't know you."

"You—you don't know me, anyhow," returned Molly.

"Nor you me. But at first I thought you did. It sure was jolly. To think I almost didn't ride to town!"

"That would have been terrible, wouldn't it?" murmured Molly.

"There's a strange thing about you—a lack I can't understand," he went on.

"What—do you mean?" faltered Molly.

"Oh, it's the most wonderful thing for me. I mean about the—the lack of that best fellow you said you didn't have. How does it happen? Have you a fierce father or brother?"

"You bet I have. Both!" replied Molly with a little laugh.

"Then that accounts. I'm glad. I was afraid of something else. Very well, I make application for the vacant place."

"Place?" echoed Molly weakly.

"Yes. I most earnestly apply for the job of being your best fellow."

"Oh, you—you can't be serious!"

"Serious? I'm afraid it is," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"You don't know me. And I haven't any recommendations. But I'd like you to take me on without these."

"It isn't customary," returned Molly, trying to be light when she feared he might hear the outrageous beating of her heart.

"I would take you as my best girl —my *only* girl, I should say, without one single thing beside your 'Yes'."

"You're—you're—" Molly did not know just what he was, besides being very careless and foolish. He had her almost leaning on his shoulder now. She had not made the slightest resistance. She was as unstable as water. Still, she tried to think in spite of his nearness and her dawning emotions. "If I said—yes—an'— an' afterwards you went back on me!"

"Good heavens! Little girl, you had better say 'Yes' pretty quick or I'll—"

He choked at the end of that passionate utterance. Molly knew what he meant. For the moment it paralyzed her. And then it was too late. He had her in his arms—tight against his breast. Molly closed her eyes. She did not realize her state beyond the exquisite contrast to what her backwoods admirers had roused in her. And suddenly that thought ended in a singular revulsion. She stiffened. She repulsed him with a stinging slap which, blindly delivered, struck him across the lips.

He uttered an inarticulate cry of surprise and regret. His hand went to his mouth, and then he applied a handkerchief there. The force of the blow had cut his lip.

"I apologize," he said constrainedly. "Sure lost my head—but I didn't mean to insult you."

Molly, with as unaccountable an impulse as the other placed a tender trembling hand on his lips. "I—I'm sorry," she whispered wildly. "I didn't mean that—at all." And she followed the touch of her hand with a shy swift kiss. Then she gasped at her utter effrontery.

"Well!—You make sweet amends," he said haltingly, as if she were beyond him. "By that did you mean 'Yes'?"

Molly dropped her head and covered her face with her hands. The tight, hot constriction in her breast eased its grip. "I don't know what I meant, only it wasn't 'Yes.' "

"In that case you'd better explain."

Molly looked up, impelled by his tone. His eyes burned doubtfully upon her. His face shone pale in the moonlight.

"I—I'm dishonest," she burst out. "I've slapped boys before when they —took liberties with me. I liked them, I suppose, but I didn't want them kissin' me. I really gave in to you—only, I wasn't fair. I wasn't honest. I hit you because I—I wanted you to keep on believin' I was what all these people thought. They've made me act a lie. Me—in these pretty clothes! But, oh, I could not help it. I was afraid all the time. I *knew* somethin' terrible would happen."

"You wanted me to believe you were what?" he asked sharply, bending over her.

"Like Miss Price an' her friends."

"I think they might do well by being more like you," he returned. "I asked to be your best fellow. I sure never asked it of any of them."

"But you don't know me!" cried Molly, distracted.

"I can see and think, can't I? You're the sweetest, loveliest little girl I ever met."

Molly was brutally torn between the ecstasy of that and the mercilessness of her honesty. "Fine feathers make fine birds," she replied bitterly.

"You poor kid! There's something queer here, but I swear it's not in you. I'm taking your kiss for 'Yes'! What else could a kiss mean?"

"No, no. It meant nothin'," said Molly.

"Are your kisses so common, then?"

"You're the first boy I *ever* kissed," she flashed at him.

"I'm very proud of that. Well, then, what else could it mean except 'Yes'?"

"But you don't know who I am!"

"You're my sweetheart!" he returned triumphantly.

Molly suffered during one instant of glorious exaltation. "I am Molly Dunn, of the Cibeque," she said.

"Molly Dunn. What a pretty name! Cibeque? Oh, that's the valley you told me about."

"Yes. They call it the brakes of the Cibeque."

"Dunn. I've heard that name, too. Oh yes, I got into an argument with a fellow named Dunn. Slinger Dunn, they called him. He's a desperado! Wonderful-looking chap. They call him 'Slinger' because of his habit of throwing a gun. He has killed several men. The sheriff here is scared to death of him. I happened to cross his trail, unfortunately, and gave him a piece of my mind. If I ever saw lightning in a man's eyes I saw it then. Whew! Well, his companion, as tough-looking as he was, dragged him away. Saved me a scare if not more."

"His right name is Arch," replied Molly, and rose to her feet.

"Of course, living around here you'd have heard of him. It must be disgusting to have a criminal like that roaming around with the name of Dunn. People might think he is related to you."

"He is my brother."

"Good God! Your brother? You lovely, dainty, sweet little lady! Why, I saw him again, drunk and dirty, hobnobbing with Mexicans and Indians. If he's a—one of your family, he surely must be an outcast."

"No. He was home the day I left to come here."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" he began hurriedly. "I've hurt you. I never dreamed —please forgive me. After all, it was natural enough. Another of my damned tenderfoot blunders! But who would ever think that you—"

"Ah! Now you've said it," she interrupted passionately.

"Miss Dunn, I was only going to say who would ever think a wonderful girl like you could have such a brother. Well, it makes no difference to me, I assure you of that," he said. He was regarding her fearfully and again he had turned pale.

The bitterness of reality had steeled Molly, yet she shook inwardly as he stood there, erect and earnest, doing her honor. "Yet it does, or you couldn't have talked so," she replied, shaking her head.

"I say it doesn't," he retorted. "And I certainly shall hold you to your word."

"Word? I didn't give any."

"You kissed me. You can't get over that."

"No, I cain't — but it wasn't a promise."

"It certainly was. More than a promise. Unless you lied to me."

"Lie? I wouldn't lie to you," she declared.

"Then I hold you to it. Come, let's forget the—the thing. You see, Molly, we fell in love before we got acquainted. Didn't we?"

"I didn't say we—fell in love," returned Molly.

"Not in words—yet."

"I kissed you because I wanted to be square," she said. "With myself, same as with you. I sure wasn't when I hit you. That's all."

"How can you say that? Kissing me proved your honesty. And for such a girl as I hold you to be, a kiss means a good deal. It just about means everything."

Molly desperately cried out again that she was only Molly Dunn of the Cibeque.

At this he seized her in his arms, masterfully, yet guardedly. "Stop harping on that," he demanded. "What do I care who you are? You might be Sally Jones of the Missouri. I don't care any more than you'd care if my name was Bud Applegate instead of Jim Traft."

"Instead—of—what?" faltered Molly, slipping out of his arms.

"Why, James Traft! Jim, for short."

"Traft? But that's the name of—of the cattle king."

"Sure. I'm his nephew. My dad is his brother. I was named after Uncle Jim."

"You're the new foreman of the Traft outfit?"

"Yes, I am," he replied, nettled. "That's the very question your brother asked me. Only he was insulting and you're—well, I don't care to have *you* ridicule me. The idea of my being a foreman seems to stick in the craw of these Westerners. Why not? I'm no nincompoop."

"You're the fellow who's buildin' the drift fence?"

"Yes—I am," he replied unsteadily.

"Did you know that fence is a slap in the face to every person down in the Cibeque?"

"No, I didn't. Uncle Jim said it would rile a lot of no-good homesteaders."

"I'm the daughter of one of them. An' sister to another," rejoined Molly in tragic finality, and with a flash of eyes she left him there.

Chapter Five

Assignment for a Tenderfoot

UP TO 18 years of age James Traft had often seen his uncle, the Arizona pioneer and cattleman, who made frequent trips East. There had grown up a bond of affection between them.

Then had come an interval of four years during which Jim Traft did not visit Missouri. His vast interests had grown so complicated that he could not leave them. During this time James had been at loose ends, trying farming, clerking, and odd jobs without any indication that he might set the world on fire. At last a letter from the West at least changed the world for James.

Some passages in this blunt letter to his father were hard for James to swallow. In the natural course of events all of Jim Traft's property would go to his nephew James. But that was something aside from James

ever making good use of it. If he were a strong, resourceful boy with guts he might become a rancher. The cattle industry was growing. The days of the great rustler barons were gone, though cattle stealing still represented altogether a big loss to the range. And so on.

At first James had been humiliated and furious, and would hear nothing of going to Arizona. Nevertheless, his father prevailed in the end, and James started West.

He had telegraphed his uncle as to his arrival, but there was no one to meet him. James finally found a livery stable, where he engaged a loquacious negro to drive him, bag and baggage, out into the country. What he learned from this citizen of Flagerstown in that short drive was certainly not reassuring.

But James liked the pine forest and the gray levels along the road, and the black mountains rising in the distance. And he had a fine view of Jim Traft's ranch home.

A low-roofed comfortable porch fronted the house. Here James deposited his baggage, and paying the driver, he knocked. Nobody answered, however, so he went around to the back. A wide courtyard led out to the corrals. He espied men out there and directed his footsteps in that direction.

Soon he came upon three cowboys around a horse, and then his uncle, who stood with another man, watching them.

"Howdy, Jim!" greeted the rancher, as if he had seen his nephew only yesterday, and extended his hand. "Got your telegram, but forgot to meet you. By gum! you've sprung up like a weed."

Traft had not changed. His garb, however, was new to Jim, and consisted of high boots, corduroys tucked in them, an old leather belt with an empty gun-sheath on it, gray soft shirt, and a vest that had been new years ago. He was a stalwart figure of a man, nearing 70, still erect and rugged, with a lined hard face expressive of his life on the frontier.

"Shake hands with Ring Locke," said Traft, indicating his companion, a tall, lean, sandy-complexioned Westerner whose narrow eyes were almost hidden under an old black sombrero.

"How do!" drawled Locke, whose accent proclaimed him a Texan. "I shore am glad to meet you, suh."

"This is the nephew I told you about, Ring," went on Traft. "He has come West to run the Diamond outfit."

Jim tried to bear well the scrutiny given him by this range boss of his uncle's, a right-hand man who had been with him 20 years.

"Uncle should have said I'll *try* to run that outfit, Mr. Locke," said Jim frankly. "I'm not afraid. But I'm an awful tenderfoot."

Perhaps his earnestness favorably impressed Locke, for he smiled and replied dryly, "Wal, it aint' bad to start when you're a tenderfoot, just so long as you know it."

Jim took almost instantly to the lean Texan. But the three cowboys standing by, apparently like hitching-posts, yet with still eyes and faces, gave him an uncomfortable sensation. To be sure, they heard every word. What clean-cut, lithe-limbed young men! The one holding the horse had a gun hanging low from his belt. Jim faced this triangle of judges, expecting to be introduced. But his uncle apparently neglected or avoided it.

"We'll go back to the house," he said, and led Jim away. "Sorry I didn't meet you at the train. I reckoned I would. How's your mother?"

"Fine and well. Crazy to have me come, but scared stiff."

"Good! An' how's that storekeeper brother of mine, your dad?"

"He hasn't been so well lately, but I guess it's nothing much. He sent a letter and some things which I have for you."

"Thanks. I'll look at them later. Wal, Jim, you've growed. You're a pretty husky chap. Too heavy, mebbe, but ridin' the range will soon change that. Reckon I might have wrote you all about what I want and hope. But it wouldn't have been fair to you or me. Fact is I couldn't have said all I need to in a letter. Your dad would have throwed a fit. I reckoned it'd be better to get face to face an' have it out. Don't you figger that way, too?"

"I certainly do, Uncle, especially if it's as big and hard a job as I imagine. And if it's really true that you have made me your heir. I appreciate your kindness, but if I can't make good as a rancher—well, I don't want the property."

"Ahuh, I see." Jim felt the piercing intensity of eyes like a pale blue gleam, yet not lacking understanding. "However, what becomes of my property ain't the main issue with me. Blood is thicker than water. An' under any circumstances I'd want my only kin to have what I left."

"Then, Uncle, what is the main issue?" queried Jim anxiously.

"Wal, I reckon it's I want you to be as near a son to me as possible."

"That's easy, Uncle, if it depends on sincerity and affection and obedience."

"They'll help, but it depends most on what I said in my letter. Guts! Jim, the job I want you to take is the hardest in the West."

"I don't care. The harder the better," declared Jim.

"Fine! I like your spirit, son," exclaimed Traft, warmly, and a smile transformed his hard lined face. "Now listen. I'm runnin' about eight thousand head of cattle, mebbe more. But we can never get a count. That's a lot of stock, Jim. Figger out the value at forty dollars a head, which is a low estimate. Wal, I lose from a thousand head up every year. Most of this loss can be laid to cattle thieves. I've reason to believe Ring Locke knows it's worse than he'll tell me. Anyway, he's the best-posted cowman on the range. Blodgett runs a big lot of cattle. So does Hep Babbitt. They're all losin' stock, too."

"Uncle Jim, this is bad," declared Jim in surprise. "You're being robbed, but you don't know where the cattle go?"

"Humph! We know darn well where they're goin'. South of here, in the brakes under the Diamond. An' the Diamond, I should explain, is high country south of here. On three sides it sheers straight down an' cattle can't get off. But on the west, for forty miles or so, it slopes off into the roughest canyon country in Arizona. Thicker than the Tonto. These canyons head up high in the timber an' run down deep an' rough. All of them have fine grass an' water. Wal, a good deal of stock, especially cows with unbranded calves, drift into these draws an' work down into the brakes. There the cows are killed an' the calves stolen. It used to be these thieves would take the meat an' bury or burn head an' hide. But

lately they kill too many. Locke's last report shore riled me."

"Then, Uncle, this tough job you're giving me has to do with thieves," asserted Jim.

"Wal, I should sort of smile it does," drawled Traft.

"But why not entrust it to an experienced Westerner, like Locke?"

"Locke can't bother with it, an' wouldn't if he could—at least the way I want to stop it. An' as I told you I want a Traft to do this. Son, it'll be a big thing for the range, if we succeed. I don't want one of these gun-packin' cowboys to have the credit, when I can throw it to you."

"You're very kind, Uncle," said Jim dryly. "Are you sure anyone but a fool tenderfoot would tackle the job?"

Traft laughed. He was growing more at ease with Jim. "Some of my boys are achin' to get the job. Jim, my Diamond outfit is the toughest bunch of cowpunchers in Arizona. An' it's this Diamond outfit you're to take charge of. Now to come out with my plan. I want a drift fence built from my ranch here clear down across the Diamond to where it jumps off. A hundred-mile fence!"

"Well, the building of a fence even a hundred miles long oughtn't to be so difficult."

"Shore it won't. But keepin' it up after it's built is where the hell will come in."

"There'll be opposition? Down on the Diamond?"

"Shore will. An' for that matter all over the range. Even Blodgett is oncertain about fencin' the range. You see, a barbed wire fence in this country is nothin' short of murder. An' these nesters an' homesteaders an' backwoodsmen will lose by it. An' as for cowboys—Lord, how they hate any kind of a fence! I reckon I used to. But I'm ahead of my day. I can see what is needed an' what is comin'. So, Jim, you can trust me so far as the benefit to ranchers is concerned."

"Uncle, have you an actual right to fence the range?"

"Shore, but it's open to question. If it ever went to law I'd have to prove my contention. An' whoever sued me would have to show why he was bein' hurt. No honest cattleman will ever take such action. An' I'm shore doubtful about any of the homesteaders goin' so far."

"Could you prove your contention, which of course is that you are being robbed?" queried Jim earnestly.

"Wal, I could, if Ring Locke an' some of my cowboys would testify. But they hate the idea like sixty. I'll expect you to find out what they know, an' then add evidence of your own."

"I see. How about your moral right?"

"Jim, I'm glad you ask that. You're no fool, if you are a tenderfoot. The question of moral right is the most puzzlin' one—the most open to argument. My own conscience is clear on that. I *know* in the long run the range will benefit."

"How do you know? Prove it to me."

"Wal, you can see how us big cattlemen will profit by it, an' the little cattlemen will have to stop stealin'."

"If there's no more to it, you're absolutely right. But won't you close the range or fence off part of it from them?"

"In some sense, yes. But only those draws an' canyons I told you about. There's shore water an' grass enough

in them for ten times the stock they own. Any one of them will admit that. These honest ranchers will just stop appropriatin' calves they're not shore they own, an' the other kind—wal, we'll put them up a stump. Some of them will quit. An' others will cut our fence an' go right ahead stealin'. That's where our trouble will come in. Mebbe we can stop it in a few years, mebbe not. Some of the ranchers here think it'll start a long hard fight. An' that's why they're leaving it to me."

"Wal, Uncle, what do *you* think it will lead to?"

"Nothin' much compared to what I've been through. But I reckon some fence-cuttin' an' hard ridin' an' shootin' will seem a whole lot to you. Jim, I'm puttin' a lot on you. An' I reckon in a way it's selfish."

"No. Nothing of the kind," replied Jim hastily. "I believe implicitly in you, Uncle Jim. I'll make your ideals and motives mine. Otherwise, I'm scared stiff, but I believe I like the tough job you've given me—if I can only make a go of it!"

"Wal, the best encouragement I can give you is that I like the way you face it," returned Traft.

"Thanks, Uncle. That'll help a lot," declared Jim feelingly.

Chapter Six

"You're Out West Now."

A WEEK elapsed before the Diamond outfit came in from the range. Jim made the most of that reprieve. He was up at dawn and did not go to bed till late. He went at Ring Locke like a youngster who could not swim in a swift current and was going to hold on or die. But Locke seemed only kind and aloof. He answered some questions; he never vouchsafed any range lore. Jim was sharp enough to find out, however, that Locke had a keen eye for him, and this gave him some grain of comfort.

During the wait he rode or tried to ride all the mustangs and bronchos about the place. He familiarized himself with every nook and cranny of the ranch, and there were 1,000 acres and more, including the timber.

One morning he had returned from a disastrous determination to stick on the back of a mustang, and had again taken up a dirty job at the barn, when a farmhand approached him with a message: "Boss says the Diamond outfit is in, waitin' fer you."

Jim let them wait awhile, until he got himself thoroughly dirty and tired and cross. Then he limped round to the bunkhouses. His uncle did not appear to be among the bunch of cowboys at the last house.

He approached the young men, and before he got even close he saw they constituted a remarkable group.

"How do, boys!" he said bluntly, as he halted before them. "So you're the Diamond outfit I'm to boss? Well, I'm not a damn bit gladder to meet you than you are to meet me."

Most of them greeted him with a word or nod.

"Who was your last foreman?" asked Jim.

One of them replied, "Jud Blue."

"Is he here with you now?"

"Jud was shot last month down on the Diamond."

"Shot! Was it an accident?"

"Shore was, for him. But whoever did it was lookin' pretty straight."

Jim did not betray the shock this intelligence gave him. "Which one of you has been the longest with my uncle?"

"Hump Stevens, heah, was in the first Diamond outfit. Six years ago, wasn't it, Hump?"

"Round aboot thet," drawled a tall, tawny cowboy.

"Stevens, then, ought to be foreman of this outfit," returned Jim. "And after him every one of you according to your service. Well, let's understand each other right now. I certainly am not stuck on the job and think I'm the last fellow on earth to tackle it. But my uncle has put it on me. He wants to leave his property to me. And I won't have it unless I can deserve it. And that means make good at ranching from the ground up."

Blank, still faces baffled Jim. It was impossible to tell whether or not these cowboys were in the least impressed. They certainly thought he was a liar.

"You can lay off till Monday morning," added Jim curtly. And he gathered that his first order to them had been received with a pleasant surprise.

He carefully kept out of their way for a day and a half. On Saturday afternoon he went to town, and he had not been there long before he heard that the Diamond outfit was painting it some very vivid red.

Presently he went into a poolroom to buy a smoke. The place was fairly well crowded, and at the very first table he saw a cowboy he recognized as one of his Diamond outfit. He was in the act of making a shot. But he straightened up. His tanned young face was flushed and there were other indications that he had been drinking.

"Boss, I ain't doin' nothing," he said.

"Who said you were?" returned Jim.

"You're lookin' for Curly then? Sheriff Bray just collared him. Honest, boss, Curly was behavin' himself strick proper. But Bray has got it in for us Diamond fellers. This sheriff is a fourflusher, boss. He's never had one of us in jail yet."

"Which way did they go?" asked Jim.

"Down the street. The jail's across the tracks."

Jim hurried out and in the direction mentioned. He did not take kindly to the idea of one of his cowboys going to jail. While crossing the tracks, he espied Bray dragging a reluctant and protesting cowboy along the station platform. Jim intercepted them. This cowboy he also recognized, a tall handsome fellow with curly yellow hair, just now very red in the face.

"Hold on, Sheriff!" called Jim as he confronted them. "You've got one of my boys. What's the charge?"

"Hullo!" gruffly returned Bray. He was a burly man, thick-featured, with a bluish cast of countenance, and he wore his sheriff's badge and gun rather prominently. "Oh, it's young Mr. Traft. I didn't know you. Wal, this boy was gettin' a little too obstreperous to suit me. So I'm runnin' him in."

"Curly, what'd you do?" inquired Jim.

"Boss, I was singin'," asserted Curly. "This heah one-hoss ossifer sings in—choir an' he thinks he's—only singer."

"Wal, you can sing in jail," declared the sheriff.

"Bray, I reckon you'd better not run Curly in," said Jim coolly. "Let's walk along across and get away from this crowd. I'll take Curly around the block."

"Say, for a tenderfoot you're start-in' right in to play a high hand," sneered Bray.

By this time Jim's blood had grown a little hot. He jerked Curly free from the sheriff.

"I'll arrest you both for resistin' an officer," threatened Bray.

"Boss, let go an' stand aside. This heah ain't funny no more," spoke up Curly. The change in him, the ring in his voice, made Jim jump, but he did not release the cowboy.

"No, Curly, I'm responsible here," he replied.

Bray had subtly altered, which fact Jim grasped to have to do with Curly's sudden menace. "Wal, Traft, I'll let him go in your care," he growled. "But I'm givin' you a hunch. Prentiss said somethin'. This Diamond outfit ain't funny no more."

"Thanks, Bray. I consider that a compliment to me. Come on, Curly."

Jim walked the cowboy down the block and up a side street until they got out of the center of the town. Neither he nor Curly broke silence during this walk. Finally Jim halted on a corner.

"Curly, will you go back to the ranch? I'd go with you, but I've errands to do."

"I reckon. The Diamond ain't disobeyin' orders. But what'd you want to go do this heah trick for? They ain't a-goin' to stand for me bein' friends with a tenderfoot boss."

He wheeled and strode away.

Jim was entering the hotel, where he expected to meet his uncle and ride home with him, when he was detained by another member of the Diamond, who barred his way obviously if not rudely. Two other cowboys drew back.

"Excuse me, Mister Traft. I'm Hack Jocelyn, an' I'm wantin' a word with you." He was cool and insolent.

"Aren't you one of my cowboys?" asked Jim.

"I've been ridin' with the Diamond, if thet's what you mean. But I ain't shore I'm stayin' with the outfit."

"You're not, eh? Well, you want to be pretty sure, or you won't be riding for it. What do you want?"

"I was in Babbitt's an' they told me they'd sent out a wagonload of barbed wire to the ranch. Fer the Diamond outfit! An' I calls him a liar."

"Then you'll have to apologize. It was for the Diamond. And there's a carload more ordered."

"But barbed wire is most used fer fences!" exclaimed the cowboy. His two comrades edged closer until they were beside him, watchful, hiding their feelings, if they had any. "An' nobody would reckon the Diamond'd have anythin' to do with thet!"

"The Diamond is in for some new experience, Jocelyn. And you may as well know fence building is one of them."

"Haw! Haw! It shore is. A tenderfoot dude foreman! Then barbed-wire fence! What's the range comin' to?"

Jocelyn had turned to his companions, to whom, in fact, his exclamation had been directed. Jim shot out a hand and spun him around like a top.

"Did you call me a tenderfoot dude foreman?"

"Wal, Mister Traft, I reckon I did," Jocelyn drawled.

Jim knocked him flat. He had not calculated consequences. In accepting his uncle's job he had burned his bridges behind him. But when Jim saw Jocelyn lying there, then slowly rising, his hand to his face, which was black as a thundercloud, he awoke to another sensation. He would not, however, have recalled the blow.

"Jocelyn, you're fired," he said as coolly as the cowboy had spoken. "But if you come out to the ranch and apologize to me I'll take you on again."

Thereupon Jim turned to enter the hotel, where among several persons who had been spectators of the little byplay were his uncle and Ring Locke.

"Hello! Say, I'm sorry you happened to see that," said Jim regretfully.

"Come inside," rejoined Traft, and when the three of them were out of earshot of bystanders he turned to Locke. "Ring, he called Hack's bluff. An' mebbe he didn't poke that puncher's snoot! I damn near choked myself to keep from yellin'."

"Uncle!" exclaimed Jim.

"Son, the only fault I can locate in you so far is you talk too quick an' too much. It'll get you in serious trouble."

Chapter Seven

Building Fence

LATE on Sunday afternoon, while Jim sat on the porch, his uncle called attention to a cowboy approaching. "Bud Chalfack," announced Traft with a chuckle. "He's the peacemaker of the outfit. Whenever anyone is in wrong, Bud is elected to set him right."

"Ahuh," returned Jim dubiously. He watched the cowboy stroll up the lane and down the path to the porch. Bud appeared to be a little fellow, but sturdy, bowlegged, and otherwise suggestive of long association with horses. He had an open, guileless countenance and he reminded Jim of a rosy-faced cherub.

"Good evenin', Mr. Traft, an' howdy, boss!" he said cheerfully. "May I set down?"

"Shore, Bud," replied Traft genially.

"Is Hack here?" asked Jim quietly.

"He's down at the bunkhouse. I been sent fer him."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"Wal, fust off he wouldn't come an' I reckon now he ain't able."

Bud's face was averted for a moment, during which Jim shot a quick glance at his uncle, to be rewarded by a wink. Jim drew a breath of relief and gave in to the fun of the situation.

"I see. Then he can't come over to apologize and get his job back. Or did he want to do it?"

"Wal, Hack shore wanted the job back all right, but he hated the terms. He said, 'Jest tell the boss I'll apologize if he'll swear I won't have to dig no postholes.' "

"Bud, I'm afraid Hack will have to dig holes along with the rest of us. I sure expect to," said Jim gravely.

"All right, sir. Thet's shore fairer'n any foreman I ever rode under. But Hack won't never dig no postholes. We had it out with him an' so I may as well tell you. Boss, shore your uncle has told you what this drift fence will do?"

"He hasn't told me anything," replied Jim.

"Wal, some of us will have to, then," said Bud. "Hack swears we'll have to fight. He knows Seth Haverly an' his outfit of the Cibeque. We'll have hell buildin' thet fence, an' wuss'n hell when we get it done."

"Bud, is the Diamond game to build that drift fence?" queried Jim.

"You bet your life it is," flashed Bud.

"Are you going to stick together?"

"Wal, we reckon nothin' but death can bust the outfit."

"If I left it to a vote, how many of you would be for building the fence?"

"Boss, we've already voted. This mawnin'. An' Hack was the only fellar to drop a black mark in the hat. Leastways, we think it was Hack. The most of us believe that Mr. Traft knows more an' sees farther, an' wouldn't never do no homesteader or little cattleman a low-down trick. We're going to believe he's right an' stand by him."

"But you all think he shouldn't have saddled this job on to a tenderfoot nephew?"

"Wal, I—I reckon we do," replied Bud.

"There!" cried Jim triumphantly to his amused uncle. "See what you've done! Come, Bud, I'll walk down to the bunkhouse with you."

He found half a dozen of the boys there, but missed Curly Prentiss. Hack Jocelyn lay on a bunk under a window, the light of which showed him badly bruised up.

"Hack, you get your job back, but it was a halfhearted apology," said Jim.

"Boss, I'd never give in but fer this low-down lousy outfit," replied Jocelyn. "An' I'm tellin' you straight, I won't dig no postholes. I'll cut an' haul posts. I'll cook an' wash, an' I'll pack water an' run errands."

Jocelyn peered hard out of his unclosed eye, at this new specimen of range foreman, and then gave up with a disgusted grunt.

Next morning before sunrise the Diamond rode out upon their momentous adventure. Thirty saddle and pack horses, one four-horse wagon hauling wire and tools, and the chuck wagon, made quite a cavalcade.

Jim started the work just after the noon hour and it beat any circus he ever attended. He dug the first hole himself.

"There!" he exclaimed, in satisfaction.

"*Whoopee!*" yelled Hack Jocelyn in stentorian voice. "Boys, heah's the grave of the Diamond!"

His fellow cowboys whooped so wildly in reply that Jim felt constrained to believe Jocelyn's pessimistic augury. Then, under Jim's orders, they set to work, and they yelled and swore, and kept up a constant harangue with one another.

The first day ended with Jim's adding a lame back and blistered hands to his other ills. They had camped in the open field, where a few straggling pines had escaped the lumbermen, and the site was far from pretty.

The cook had been highly recommended to Jim, by no less a person than himself, and that, too, in writing. He claimed to hear fairly well, but he was dumb. Shot in the throat once by a vicious cowboy!

"Say, when is thet cadiverous galoot a-goin' to yell, 'Come an' get it'?" demanded Hack.

"Anybody know what his handle is?" asked another.

"Boys, our cook's name is Jeff Davis," announced Jim. "He hails from Alabama. He can't talk, but he wrote he could hear fairly well."

"Why cain't he talk?" asked Hack.

"A dumb cook! Holy Jupiter! We're Jonahed fer keeps."

"Fine. He cain't cuss the daylights out of us."

"Wal, if he can cook—okay!"

After supper they had a campfire around which they sat and smoked. Jim enjoyed that hour. The infinite and various moods of the cowboys seemed to have flagged. Then one by one they rolled in their tarpaulins.

Next morning Jim hobbled around cheerfully and went to work. That turned out to be a trying day, particularly in keeping at it. Upon returning to camp he washed his blistered hands, and then thinking to rest a little before supper, he sought his bed.

But it was gone. At first he imagined he had mistaken the place, but he soon reassured himself that he was right about the location. After a few moments he discovered his bedroll high up in a pine tree, swinging by the rope. Jim swore under his breath. If he had climbed that tree, crippled as he was, it would afford those devilish cowboys a treat. He just would not attempt it. They stood and sat around, waiting for call to supper, and obviously they were aware of his predicament.

"Oh, were I a little bir-r-rd," sang one of them.

Jim decided he would make one gigantic bluff. Whereupon he went to his pack, and taking up his Colt, he aimed steadily at the rope above his head and shot. He cut the rope. As he gasped, the bedroll fell with a heavy thump.

Then approaching the cowboys he said seriously, "I sure hope none of you hombres make me throw a gun on you."

That night around the campfire they were thoughtful, and whispered behind Jim's back. He went to bed knowing the war was on, and that he was in for utter rout. Ring Locke had said cowboys when pressed would do anything under the sun. Jim could only regulate his conduct according to theirs. The main issue for him was to earn their respect.

By the end of the week they had finished the drift fence townward to where it joined Traft's ranch. They had also about finished Jim. Saturday night he spent alone in camp, except for the cook. Late Sunday afternoon the cowboys began to straggle back in twos and threes, some of them still pretty drunk. Jim resented that.

On Monday at dawn they broke camp and drove south to the edge of the timber, perhaps another five miles.

At this camp matters came to a pass where Jim grew beside himself with rage. And the incident that capped the climax was where Curly Prentiss, after gradually and perceptibly leaning toward friendship for Jim, suddenly became alienated. Jim laid this to influence of a clique of four in the Diamond outfit, the ringleader being Hack Jocelyn.

"Curly," Jim said, "you've got a saffron streak as wide as the road."

"Boss, is thet thar relatin' to my work on this heah drift fence?" queried Prentiss, with a keen glance toward two of the cowboys who had certainly heard Jim.

"No. I'm bound to admit you do more than your share."

"Wal, then, I'm taking your remark as personal, an' if *you* ain't just as yellow you'll step out with me."

"Good Lord, Curly!" ejaculated Jim wearily. "You wouldn't make it a matter of guns?"

"Wal, in this heah country a man has to protect himself."

"Ahuh. And how am I to protect myself from most of this devilish bunch without a friend?" queried Jim bitterly. "I've been banking on you right along. You have helped me a good deal, though you may not know it. I like you. And I swear you were beginning to like me. Then all of a sudden you turn cold and mean."

"So that's why you called me saffron?" asked Prentiss, with curious little flecks of light in his eyes.

"Yes, it is."

"Wal, the outfit put it up to me this heah way. They accused me of bein' friends with you. An' they made me cut the .deck. You or the Diamond."

"So that's it," replied Jim. "I never thought of that. Naturally you'd stick to them."

"Shore. An' I'm demandin' an apology before the outfit," said Curly with the air of one who held a whip hand.

"Suppose I won't?"

"Wal, then, as you cain't stand fer a little gunplay, I'll have to lick you," drawled Curly.

"Curly, you couldn't do that if you tried it every day we are building this fence."

"Mister Traft, I'm shore differin' with you. An' I'll show you pronto."

"Well, let's get the apology over first," replied Jim dryly. "Fellows, I've a word to say," he began, and the slow sly glances he drew made him want to swear at them. "I want to apologize to Curly before you all. I told him he had a streak of saffron. Well, I take it back. And instead of Curly I'll apply it to those of you who made Curly turn me down. I don't know who they are, but *you* know. It is pretty low-down. This rotten job I've tackled for my uncle has got on my nerves. There's so much I don't know. Curly or any one of you could help me. I think he was leaning that way. But you made him quit."

Then Jim turned to Curly. "There, Mister Prentiss. You politely invited me to a gun party, and then threatened to lick me. But neither of these made me apologize to you. It was because I had done you an injustice. Now I'll tell you some more before your grinning-ape pards. You can't lick me. And unless you make a blamed good stab at it right here and now I *will* say you're yellow."

Curly's face was more of a study than that of his allies, which certainly presented a good deal in puzzles.

"Boss, I reckon your uncle will—" began Bud, conscience-stricken.

"Shet-up, you durn little crow!" bawled somebody.

Lonestar Holliday burst into the circle. "Fellars, heah comes thet Slinger Dunn," he whispered.

Chapter Eight

Gun-Slinger

TWO riders had come out of the woods. They were not cowboys, yet Jim could not in a glance determine why he made that distinction.

The foremost of these two riders

did not greet the Diamond, individually or collectively. And Jim, quick to note this and that none of his men spoke, waived any sort of greeting himself. But he stepped out in front with an air of authority.

"You the new boss of this heah Diamond outfit, hey?" inquired the rider in cool hostility.

"Yes. I'm supposed to be," replied Jim.

Holliday took a couple of slow steps, which placed him beside Jim.

"Boss, it's Slinger Dunn an' his pard, Seth Haverly, from the Cibeque," said Holliday crisply.

"What kind of a fence is this heah goin' to be?" queried Dunn.

"A drift fence to hold cattle," returned Jim.

"What's the idee—a drift fence?"

"What do you suppose?" counter-queried Jim, just as curtly. Then he gazed up into burning eyes that positively gave him a shock.

The second rider came up. "Arch, let's get goin'," he said.

"Wal, I suppose a lot. But I'm askin' questions," went on Dunn. "This heah fence is ole Jim Traft's idee?"

"Certainly it is."

"Is he aimin' to fence free range?"

"It will divide the range, that's sure."

"Wal, I reckon you won't go far," replied the other meaningly, and he rolled a cigarette without ever taking his gleaming eyes off Jim.

"Arch, I'm sayin' let's rustle out of this," interposed Haverly.

"I'm going to the end of the Diamond with this drift fence," averred Jim. "And after it is finished my outfit will see that it stays up."

"Your outfit? Say, mister, you cain't have it in your haid thet *your* Diamond outfit will stick to you."

"I've got that notion."

"Wal, you're plumb off the trail. Even down in the brakes we heah what Jocelyn thinks of you. An' Cherry Winters. An' Uphill Frost."

"I'm sorry to admit that some of my men ridicule me," said Jim feelingly. "Perhaps it's deserved, for I sure am a tenderfoot. But all the same the drift fence goes up and *stays* up, if it takes half a dozen Diamond outfits."

Dunn poised his cigarette, arrested by a speech that evidently struck him. "Traft, no drift fence will ever stay up in Cibeque County," Dunn returned presently with grim passion.

"That remains to be seen. Thanks for giving me a hunch. And now, since you're neither polite nor agreeable, will you please mozey on out of my camp?"

Dunn's face showed the darker for a wave of blood.

His companion roughly seized him, nearly unseating him from the saddle. "Slinger, I shore ain't waitin' to be ordered out of no tenderfoot's camp," he said gruffly, dragging at Dunn.

"You're a little late," put in Jim with sarcasm. "My invitation included you. Now I say to both of you—*get out!*"

Next day the stretching of wire fence went on, and now with a remarkable celerity, compared with that done in the open country. The strands of wire were nailed upon trees, and seldom had a posthole to be dug.

Friday, at the lunch hour, Bud Chalfack approached Jim. "Boss, I'm talkin' fer the outfit," he announced. "We figger thet we're aboot up on this week's work, an' we want

this afternoon an' tomorrow off. There's a fair on in Flag, an' tomorrow's rodeo day. Most of us are entered."

Jim actually could not decide whether this was insubordination or the legitimate claim of a cowboy. "Very well, you go on your own hook," he said to Bud.

They rode off, a gay and superb group of young riders, who made his heart swell with pride and yet saddened it with the thought that he never could be received by them. Why had they not asked him to go with them? He would have been delighted. He had never seen a rodeo. But they did not want him; they were ashamed of their tenderfoot foreman.

After they had gone, Jim strode off toward the woods. He was astounded to hear Jeff Davis call.

"Boss, you oughtn't go out alone. But if you must go, take a rifle."

Jim did not answer, though he was grateful to Jeff. The cook, then, had perpetrated a hoax on the Diamond. Here would be one on the cowboys, presently. Jim assured himself that he would not betray Jeff. He did not, however, take the latter's advice, but went on into the forest alone and unarmed.

The afternoon passed, and he returned to camp, there to eat supper in silence, without appearing to remember that the cook had spoken to him. He slept well, but in the morning the old bitterness and hopelessness assailed him again. An impulse to ride to town seized him, and straightway he acted upon it.

He reached home about noon, to ascertain that his uncle was at the fair. Jim rode out there, and walked his horse. Weary and distressed, he entered the fairground; and espying a gayly decorated booth advertising lunch, he dismounted and approached the counter. He gave an order to a girl behind. When he was about through he happened to look up, to see a pair of gold-brown eyes upon him.

And they wrenched out of him the query: "What would you do if you were about licked?"

It was when the girl had finally said, "I'd get up an' fight some more!" that Jim really looked at her with seeing eyes. If her spirited reply had stirred him, what more did the toss of her pretty dark head, with its glints of gold.

She was a little girl, very young, and she wore a dainty blue dress. Still, there were contours under it that betrayed womanhood. She had a small, oval, almost dusky face. Her hands were small and brown, yet they struck him as strong and capable. She was Western, of course, but she was a little lady of quality.

By the time he had found out she did not have a best fellow he seemed far on a strange new adventure; and when he rode away toward the stands, with her shy half-promise of a dance that night, he changed his mind about his mission to Flagerstown.

He gave his horse to a boy at the stalls, and went round to the stand, where he soon found his uncle, and was welcomed in a way that made him ashamed. It pleased his uncle that he had come to town in his work clothes.

The rodeo was on. And Jim sat enthralled. He saw Curly Prentiss ride wild bronchos that threw all the other riders; he saw Hack Jocelyn break

the record for roping two-year-olds; he saw Bud Chalfack climb all over a horse, racing at breakneck speed; he saw Jackson Way ride two beautiful horses, standing with one foot on the back of each, and beat his opponents two full lengths; and lastly he saw Lonestar Holliday win the money for the perilous feat of bulldogging steers.

Out of the 16 events the Diamond outfit took nine first prizes. Jim scarcely could contain himself. That was his band of cowboys. He might have hated them before today, but now he loved them. He gathered vaguely that something tremendous had happened to him.

He rode out to the ranch house in a trance, divided between pride for his cowboys and the momentous dance near at hand. He shaved and washed and changed his clothes, aware of an undue regard for his appearance. Then he was off to the dance, eager, amused at himself, amazed, and glad.

Chapter Nine

Fists for the Diamond Boys

IT WAS Sunday, and Jim had returned to the Diamond camp, a bewildered and chastened young man. Except for Jeff, who was asleep under a tree, the camp was deserted. Jim went again into the deep shade and quiet of the forest. There his thoughts got some semblance of control over his emotions and some order in themselves.

Why had Molly kissed him? He recalled her pitiful little confession, and that hurt Jim more than anything else. She was not what he had thought her and she yearned to be. Most vivid of the things he recalled was the bitter reproach in her big eyes. Why had she reproached him? Not because he had unwittingly intimated of a wide class distinction between Jim Traft and Molly Dunn. She knew she was Molly Dunn of the Cibeque.

Jim divined suddenly that maybe she, too, had fallen in love at first sight. The ecstacy of that was short-lived. It could not be true.

Long before the supper hour the cowboys rode into camp. Jim dragged himself up and to the edge of the forest, only there bracing himself for the ordeal. Somebody saw him coming. They lined up on each side of the campfire, and faced him like a lot of grim judges.

"Howdy, boys! Back early—I see," he said cheerfully, if haltingly. "I changed my mind and went in to the rodeo yesterday. You sure gave me the treat of my life. I congratulate the outfit on so many prizes. You can bet I was proud of you."

Not a murmer! He bent over to move a couple of billets on the newly started campfire, solely to hide his face. Then he sauntered on toward the tree where he kept his pack and bed.

"Wal, boss, we heahed ya walked off with a prize yourself," called Bud Chalfack. "Some little blue-ribbon boy from Mizzourie!"

That sally was greeted by uproarious mirth. Like a giant hand it pulled Jim round. His cowboys presented a group of nine young men in varying stages of convulsions. The devil himself emanated from them. Jim choked back a sharp retort.

Then Cherry Winters, still quite drunk, staggered over to Jim, his red face a whole grin of impish delight, and essayed to deliver what must have been intended for an important speech. But its manner of delivery and incoherence spurred Jim to a blunt "Get out!" and a hard shove. Cherry kept on staggering, this time backward, and he kept on until he met Jeff's woodpile.

He fell on this, toppled it over upon him, and did not arise. The gang whooped. They had all been drinking, and Bud looked pretty wobbly on his feet.

"Tenderfoot hell!" he bawled. "You got us—skinned to frazzle."

"Thanks, Bud, but I don't quite savvy," returned Jim.

"Boss, I shore—be'n savin' somethin' up," raved Bud, beside himself with maudlin emotion. "The outfit's all heahed aboot you last night. But I *seen* you. I be'n savin' it up!"

"You better keep saving it," warned Jim.

"Aw, boss, I couldn't think of thet. It's too orful good. I gotta tell the Diamond about it,"

If Jim had any dignity left it was that of the gathering might of fury. What did the little fool know? Jim resisted a fierce impulse to slap the gaping mouth. The cowboys clamored to hear. They sensed the long-hoped-for corralling of their tenderfoot foreman.

"Boss, I seen you on the poroh," shouted Bud triumphantly. "Fellars, I seen our fastidinous boss from Mizzourie huggin' thet little hussy—Molly Dunn!"

Before Jim realized what he was doing he had leaped at Bud, to knock him also into the woodpile. The blow had been solid, and at least for the moment another of the Diamond was down and out.

Curly Prentiss jumped out from the circle, slamming his sombrero down with a smack. "You two-faced Mizzourie gent!" he yelled. "Bud's my pard. I'm shore gonna lick you for thet."

"Bah! You bowlegged cowpuncher!" blazed Jim. "If you can't fight any better than you dance—you'll never lick me."

That hurt Curly more than the blow to his friend. He threw his scarf one way, his vest another, his gunbelt at Jackson Way, and rid himself of chaps and spurs.

The delay gave Jim time to collect his wits. But even that and some semblance of coolness did not mitigate his welcome of a battle with any or all of this confounded Diamond outfit.

When Curly came lumbering in Jim stepped aside and hit him in the ribs. Curly whirled around and plunged, swinging. He delivered wide sweeping blows that, if any of them had connected with Jim, would have fulfilled the hopes of the yelling Diamond. But they expended their strength on the empty air. In a couple of moments Jim became aware that Curly could not hit him. The cowboy was a wonder in the saddle, but on the ground he was lost.

After hitting Curly a few times here and there Jim began to concentrate on Curly's big handsome nose. He whacked it with his left. Soon the blood began to flow and with it Curly's wild exuberance. But this did not improve his fighting. Then Jim landed his right and Curly sat down quite suddenly.

"Git up you big cheese!" yelled Hack Jocelyn.

Curly responded to that trenchant call. In the ensuing few moments he showed that his spirit was willing but his flesh was weak. After the third knockdown Curly merely sat up. This time he was near Bud, who was also sitting up.

"My Gawd, pard, hev we come to this?" cried Bud, evidently sober enough to realize. "What'd he hit me with?"

"I reckon it was a hoss-shoe," said Curly, feeling his swollen and bloody nose.

Jim stepped closer and peered down at Curly. "Well, Prentiss, have you got enough?" he asked fiercely.

Curly looked up. "Boss, I cain't say how it came aboot, but I'm shore licked," he said, and grinned.

"Did I pick this fight?" went on Jim, quick to grasp the situation.

"You shore didn't."

"All right. Are you going to threaten me with that damn nonsense about gunplay or are you going to shake hands?"

Curly laboriously got to his feet. "I reckon I'll shake," he rejoined, and he took Jim's proffered hand.

Bud Chalfack essayed to rise, a task no means easy, owing to the billets of wood that surrounded his feet.

"Bud, you better stay there, because if you get up I'll only have to knock you down again," said Jim menacingly.

"But I wasn't fighting you. Thet was Curly," protested Bud. "You're bigger'n me an' I didn't do nothin' except give you away. An' if you hadn't socked me I'd hev told the fellars—"

"If you tell any more I'll beat you into jelly. And I'll do that anyhow unless you apologize."

"Aw! Fer callin' Molly Dunn a little hussy?"

Jim looked a grim affirmative.

"All right, boss. I crawl. But I didn't mean any insult."

"You didn't? Say, you little dumbhead! Didn't you lie when you said you saw me hug her?"

"Boss, I think I was sober *then*," replied Bud gravely. "I seen you hug her. You lifted her clean off the floor. She whacked you one—an' when you let her down, she went fer you sudden-like an' kissed you."

Jim faced the silent, puzzled cowboys. He believed for once he had the upper hand. "Boys, Bud was drunk last night. He has heaped disgrace on me and insulted a fine little girl."

Bud took violent exception to this, as was manifest from his face and actions, without the speech that followed. "Boss, it ain't no disgrace to hug a girl in Arizonie. An' if it happened to be Molly Dunn you'd shore make this outfit proud. 'Cause Molly Dunn has handed the mitt to me an' Lonestar. An' she shore set Hack Jocelyn down cold an' hard. Hack is plumb crazy over her."

"But you called her 'hussy'!" thundered Jim.

"But, boss, I didn't mean thet in no insultin' way," protested Bud. "Molly's a little wildcat. She's a devil. She has shore made this Diamond outfit sick. Why, me an' Lonestar was flirtin' with her down at West Fork, an' we never knowed she was Slinger Dunn's sister! Boss, I take thet 'hussy' back."

"Very well, in that case I'm sorry I misunderstood you," said Jim, and offered his hand to Bud.

Jeff's noisy banging call to supper ended the incident. Jim sensed an almost imperceptible transformation in the air of the cowboys, except in Jocelyn and Winters, who were surly and uncommunicative.

Jim sought his bed early. But he did not find slumber coming easily. He believed he had stumbled on a way to get the best of the Diamond outfit. These simple boys respected only achievement. They did not care in the least who a man was. It was what he could do! And Jim believed he could whip every last one of them.

But as for Molly Dunn! When Jim let clamoring thoughts of her dominate his consciousness his exultant glee died and his heart sank like lead in his breast. So some of these tough cowboys knew her! Had dared to approach her! The idea made Jim's blood run hot and cold. Still Molly could not have helped that if these cowboys had discovered where she lived or any place she frequented.

Then suddenly he recalled Molly's shy swift kiss—timid if there had ever been a timid kiss—and later her sharp retort that he had been the first ever to have that from her. The battle raged in Jim's mind—between trust and gossip, between romance and realism.

Chapter Ten

The Dunns

MOLLY DUNN filled the bucket at the spring and set it down. She had been home from Flagerstown exactly 15 days, and they seemed years.

Every day since her return home had seen a struggle. At first she had been hot and resentful in her humiliation. She had hated Jim Traft. She would be a worthy sister to Slinger Dunn. She would carry on so boldly with the riders that her name would become a byword on the range for —for—Molly did not know what, but she would find out.

But opportunities for such conduct had been multiplied and she had not availed herself of them. Seth had been often at her home, with her brother Arch, but she knew why he came. And always Andy waylaid her when she went on errands down to the village. On Sunday she had espied Hack Jocelyn riding up the trail from West Fork, and she had dodged into the brush.

As the days went by she had finally realized that she was terribly, miserably in love. Her amazement and scorn, her fury and contempt, her wretched attempts to sink under this malady and make of herself what Jim Traft must think her—all were of no avail and only added to her burden.

At length she picked up the heavy bucket and took the trail home.

Altogether Molly saw the homestead with gloomier eyes than ever. She carried the bucket into the kitchen end of the cabin.

"You've been gone long enough to dig a well," remarked her mother with sarcasm.

"That bucket is heavy an' it's a long ways," replied Molly.

"You used to fetch it in a jiffy. You met some cowboy on the trail."

"No. It's funny, but I didn't this mawnin'."

"Well, you must have fallen in the spring, then."

"Wisht I had," returned Molly flippantly. She went out and across the porch. Her father had gotten up and was slouching in his crippled way to the big blanketed chair where he passed his wakeful hours. Of late Molly had seemed to see him differently, with pity and tolerance.

Dunn was a broken man, living in the past, ruined by some secret association with an infamous war between sheepmen and cattlemen, and devoured by passions that had outlived his enemies. Molly had affection for her father, despite the impatience and disgust which grew with the years. And of late, since her own trouble, she had begun to have some little understanding of her mother—of what it must have meant to be faithful to Dunn all these years.

Molly could not control vagrant and perverse thoughts. Jim Traft had importuned her to let him be her best fellow. How pale and earnest he had looked! It was impossible to repudiate his sincerity. To be his sweetheart! Molly let out a peal of laughter that made even her father take notice.

"Lass, you've been queer since you come back from Flag," he remarked in his quavering voice.

"I feel queer, Dad," she replied. "I waked up from my backwoods sleep."

"Backwoods! You mean this heah homestead?"

"Never mind what I meant, Dad."

Molly plunged into one of her working spells. Small as she was, Molly had strength and endurance. She could work like a beaver, and she did this day, preoccupied and sad most of the time, yet cheerful during intervals.

Toward sunset, while Molly was at the woodpile—one of her many accomplishments being skill with an ax—her brother Arch approached.

"Molly, cain't you leave a little work around heah for me?" he complained.

She dropped the faggot she had picked up, and stared at him. He had shaved the golden down from chin and lips, and his dark, lean face shone clean and smooth. Arch's eyes usually lost their piercing quality when they beheld Molly. Just now they were bearable.

"Arch, you shore ain't drunk," she said, thoughtfully regarding him.

"No. An' I ain't sick, nuther," he replied. "Never mind you aboot me. But cain't I be civil without you gettin' sassy?"

"Shore, I hope so. An' now I know somethin' ails you, Arch."

"Set down. A fellar cain't talk in there," he said, jerking a sinewy brown hand toward the cabin. "Dad is out of his haid. An' Mother—wal, poor Mother raves if you so much as open your mouth."

"Poor Mother? Yes, an' poor Dad, too. Arch, you said a lot."

"Molly, what chanct have we ever had to help make them different?" he queried, swallowing hard. "I never had no schoolin' atall. An' you—only a couple of years. What do we know? An' before I was sixteen I was Slinger Dunn!"

"Arch, is it too late?" she whispered.

"Hell, yes, for me. But for you, Molly—wal, mebbe it's not. I hope to Gawd it ain't."

"Arch, if you want to know, I'm as down in the mouth as you," said Molly.

"You have been queer lately, since you come home. Molly, did anythin' happen at Flag?"

"A whole lot."

"Wal, tell me aboot it."

Molly laughed. "So you can shoot somebody up? No, Arch, you cain't ever help me that way."

"Is thet so? Wal, you never know. But all the same, tell me."

"Arch, it was awful for me," she replied, unable to resist sympathy. "Mrs. See was lovely. Bought me clothes—an' oh! such a beautiful dress. I—I was the belle at that dance, Arch. Can you believe it? I was crazy with joy—at bein' taken for a—a lady. I must have looked one, Arch—then somethin' happened an' my heart broke."

"They found you out, Moll?" he queried shrewdly. "Thet you lived down in the brakes? Thet your dad was John Dunn? An' your brother Slinger Dunn of the Cibeque?"

"Yes, Arch, I was found out," she replied. "But I didn't go back on you."

"Shore you'd never do thet," he said somberly. "You oughtn't to have gone to Flag!"

"Arch, I am a Dunn, too."

"Moll, I come out heah to ask you a fool question. I see thet now, But I promised Seth an' I'll keep it. He wants to know if you'll marry him?"

"Seth Haverly? Heavens!—No!" she cried, aghast.

"Who you gonna marry, then—to git you out of this heah hole?"

"No one, Arch. You see that marryin' one of these Cibeque boys would only nail me heah. An' the—the kind of a boy I—I—who could save me—wouldn't have me."

"He'd be a damn poor sort, then," flashed Arch. "If I was sich a fellar as you mean I could swaller a lot for you, Molly. Don't fool yourself. You're good enough for any fellar."

Molly went to the woodpile and sat down beside him, meaning to thank him, but all she did was to burst into tears.

"Wal, don't cry," he said, almost roughly. "Molly, I heah this Diamond cowboy, Hack Jocelyn, was seen in West Fork last Sunday."

"Yes. *I* saw him, myself, an' I shore ducked into the brush."

"Reckon Jocelyn hasn't rid down heah so often the last year for nothin'. Don't you like him?"

"I did at first. But not now. He's in love, all right, but he never said nothin' about marryin' me. An' of course I wouldn't have him if he had."

"Wal, I reckon I want to tell you suthin'," he spoke up. "All this talk aboot marryin'. I up an' asked Lil Haverly to marry me. I told her I'd turn over a new leaf an' go to ranchin' if she'd have me. An' she laughed in my face! She'd let me be sweet on her, too, Molly, an' thet fooled me."

"She's no good!" retorted Molly fiercely.

"Wal, not much, mebbe. Anyway, it doesn't matter," he replied, sitting up. "Come. I'll help you pack in this wood."

Molly slaved and brooded the days away. On Sundays she accepted the calls of Andy Stoneham and other village boys. Two of these Sunday afternoons were rendered exciting by the fact of cowboys from the Diamond riding up and down the trail. Hack Jocelyn was one of them on both occasions.

"Molly," said Andy, on the second of these visits, "you know thet cowboy Jocelyn belongs to the Diamond?"

"Shore I know," replied Molly. "Is that a crime?"

"Wal, reckon 'tis, leastways since thet outfit's been buildin' the drift fence.

"This fellar Jocelyn is up to tricks. Last night I seen him in Mace's saloon. He had money an' was spendin' it. Sort of stumped me to see Seth Haverly drinkin' with him."

"No, Andy!" exclaimed Molly aroused. "Was Arch there?"

"Reckon not. Arch hasn't been around lately. Now what's he a-goin' to say to thet?"

"Say! He won't say anythin'. But he's liable to do somethin'. Seth an' Arch are like brothers."

"Molly, around hyar Arch is considered a dangerous fellar, but one you can trust. Seth ain't so dangerous, they say, but he cain't be trusted. Now we know thet Arch an' Seth, the other Haverlys, an' Hart Merriwell an' Boyd Flick an' some others make up the Cibeque outfit. One or more of them, on an' off, rode fer the Coffee Pot, the Hash Knife, the Bar O an' other outfits in the valley. But so far as I know not one of them is ridin' fer any outfit now —except their own."

Molly echoed his last words and she caught the significance of his lowered voice and roving look around.

"It jest strikes me funny thet Jocelyn of the Diamond seems to be makin' up to Seth Haverly of the Cibeque. How does it strike you, Molly?"

"Not funny, you can bet," replied Molly, with a short laugh. "Andy, there's somethin' in the wind. I'm thankin' you for givin' me a hunch. Arch is strange an' sore lately. He's that touchy aboot the Diamond boys an' their work I cain't get a word out of him."

"Ahuh. Wal, Molly, you can shore get them out of me," rejoined Andy. "I heard folks talk aboot Jocelyn.

An' I'll tell you what. If he keeps on ridin' down to West Fork it's gonna be plumb bad fer him."

"Oh—Andy!" faltered Molly.

"Slinger will *kill* him," whispered Andy. "He'll never stand fer Jocelyn runnin' after you. Molly, air you shore you ain't interested in Jocelyn a-tall?"

"Yes, I'm shore."

"Molly, do you know thet son-of-a-gun tenderfoot Traft is 'most clear to the brakes with his damned fence?"

"I—I—hadn't heahed," replied Molly, thrilling.

"Wal, he is. Most clear on the Diamond! Ole Enoch Summers says, 'Tenderfoot hell! Thet boy is Jim Traft over again, an' you two-bit calf-chasers hev gotta look out.' "

"Did Mr. Summers—say that?" gasped Molly.

"He shore did, an' to a whole storeful of fellars."

From that hour Molly was kinder to Andy. She relied upon him to fetch her news—the facts as well as gossip. And Andy, evidently sensing some change in her, accepted the part gratefully.

Chapter Eleven

Encounter on the Trail

DRY, hot midsummer lay upon the Cibeque. In the shade of the glen Molly spent hours idle on a rock, watching the big trout lying still in the clear waters. Things that concerned the life of West Fork revolved uppermost in her mind.

Arch had been home steadily for a month, more morose than she had ever seen him. But he had driven Molly out of the beanfield and had harvested the beans himself. She tried not to see that he and the Haverly gang had cattle deals frequently. They drove cattle in from the brakes and down the Cibeque, small bunches and short drives that had a sinister significance to Molly.

She went back home through the woods.

At a thickly overgrown point, where the trail turned, a brown hand shot out from the green and grasped her arm. Molly was not the screaming kind. But she struggled with all her fierce young strength. It availed nothing, however, and she was dragged through the brush a step or two into a little clearing beside a huge fallen pine. Molly was frightened but not surprised to look up into the dark face of Hack Jocelyn.

"Howdy, sweetheart!" he drawled. "I bin layin' fer you."

"Let go," said Molly, and she jerked so hard that she freed her arm. "What do you want? Did you have to drag me in heah?"

"Wal, there's some folks I'd rather not see me," replied Jocelyn.

"My brother Arch, for one, I reckon."

"No. I'm standin' tolerable with Slinger. I was thinkin' of thet sneak, Andy Stoneham. He's got eyes an' he thinks too much. Molly, I've quit the Diamond."

Molly peered up under the big sombrero, at the cowboy's handsome face. It bore signs of recent battle.

"I couldn't stand Jim Traft no longer," went on Jocelyn. "I bin layin' fer a chance to quit a month an' more. We had some words. An' it ended in a fist fight."

"Did he lick you?" asked Molly, unable to resist her swift curiosity.

"I reckon he did," returned Jocelyn ruefully. "He's a slugger with his fists, an' thet kind of fightin' ain't mine. I couldn't make him draw a gun while I was ridin' with the Diamond, so I jest quit."

"Ahuh. Quit so you *could* make him?"

"Shore. An' I reckon thet sounds good to you?"

"It means nothin' to me," replied Molly, lying with tight lips.

"What was this heah talk aboot Bud Chalfack seein' Traft insult you at the fair dance in Flag?"

"Mr. Jocelyn, if he did, that's my business an' none of yours." Molly looked away into the forest, conscious of deep-seated pain. "Good day, Mr. Jocelyn. I'll be goin'," she said, and moved away.

Like a panther he leaped at her, cursing under his breath. She was a leaf in his grasp and he realised it. He lifted her high, held her close, and it was only by contortions of her supple body that she escaped hot fierce kisses on her lips. But they burned face and neck.

"You're stayin' heah—till I get through—with you," he panted.

"Let me—down. I—I'll stay," choked Molly.

He let her slide till her feet touched the ground, but did not at once release her. Molly burned with more than shame.

"I reckon you'd better," he said, giving her a shake. "Molly, I'm through with the Diamond an' I'm throwin' in with the Cibeque. If you fell sweet fer Jim Traft, like them moon-eyed Flag girls, you can jest forget it. 'Cause I'm crazy in love with you an' I'm goin' to have you. An' you'll marry me as soon as I make the stake we—I'm figgerin' on."

"Marry you! Mister Jocelyn, you're shore takin' a lot on your haid," said Molly, aghast at his effrontery. "I'm thankin' you because a man cain't do any more than ask that of a girl, but I must say no. I don't love you."

"Wal, if I know gurls, you'll change your tune soon as I make my stake."

"Stake. What do you mean?"

"Never you mind now. I want to talk to you about your brother. You're goin' to set me straight with Slinger."

"Oh, I am!" said Molly. Her fear held her in abeyance, but she could not wholly suppress her leaping spirit. "If I know Arch Dunn that little job wouldn't be easy."

"We—I—I've figgered it out," declared Jocelyn. "It's been goin' the rounds thet Jim Traft made a show of you at the dance. An' we'll see it gets to Slinger's ears pronto. Wal, you're goin' to admit it's true, an' tell him I quit the Diamond because of it. Savvy, sweetheart?"

"I savvy that you are a deep an' ounnin' hombre, Mister Jocelyn," replied Molly sarcastically.

"You can jest bet your sweet life I am. An' now soon as you swear you'll tell this to Slinger—an', wal, give me a kiss—you can run home to your mom."

"I won't kiss you, but—I'll *think* aboot tellin' that to Arch," she replied, playing for time.

"I cain't let you go on that, Molly," he said cheerfully. He began to roll a cigarette, a shadow of a smile on his dark, smooth face.

Molly averted her eyes, lest he read in hers the thought that was forming. Once out of reach of his long arms she could get away. Molly calculated distance and moment, while concentrating all her energy. Suddenly, like a flash, she ducked and bounded at once, under the brush into the trail. Jocelyn shouted and crashed through. But Molly darted away. She could run like a deer. Her moccasined feet pattered on the hard trail. He thudded heavily after her, soon losing ground.

She screeched a laugh back at him and sped on out of his sight, never slacking her swift pace until she reached the place she had cut across to avoid the riders. Once in the clearing, she went slowly so as to regain her breath.

Molly sat down on a log to rest. And the gist of this complex situation burst upon her in realization of menace to Jim Traft. That agitated Molly even more than Jocelyn's attack on her. Hackamore Jocelyn would kill Jim, and if he did not Slinger Dunn or the Haverleys would.

And what did he mean by a stake? Molly understood the word to imply what riders called food or money that they hoped to get by some lucky or clever break. Jocelyn had certainly

meant the latter and no small amount. Molly racked her brains for a solution, which was not forthcoming. Then her mother, espying her on the log, called loudly. Molly hurried to the cabin.

"I declare, but you take long to do anythin'," said Mrs. Dunn, harshly.

"Well, so would anyone if she got waylaid by a bully of a cowpuncher," retorted Molly.

"Who?" demanded the mother, with a keen look at Molly's heated face.

Instead of answering Molly ran like a squirrel up the ladder to the loft that opened over the porch. Since Molly had been a child this had been the only room she had ever had, but she preferred it to the living-room, where her parents slept and quarreled.

Following her mother's call to supper, Molly heard Arch's slow, clinking footfall. When he wore moccasins he could not be heard at all.

"Where's Molly?" he asked.

"She came home red in the face and panting. She said she'd been waylaid by a bully of a cowpuncher."

"Ahuh. I reckon the gurl's too big an' pretty to be alone on the trails," returned the son ponderingly. "Molly is no kid any more. I hear she beat them Flag gurls all hollow at the fair dance."

"I never hear anything," complained Mrs. Dunn. "I'm stuck in this cabin from sunup till dark. I want to get away before I die on my feet."

Molly had heard such ranting of her mother's for years, but she was stunned to hear Arch reply that maybe soon they would be able to move away from the Cibeque.

"Arch! What've you done now?" queried the mother.

"Nothin' jest yet. But I reckon to make a stake soon."

"Humph. Call the girl to supper."

Arch stepped to the end of the porch and called, "Hey, Moll!"

Molly thought best to answer sleepily: "Yes, Arch. Heah I am. What you want?"

"Supper, you wood mouse," he replied, and he waited by the ladder to give her a slap and then lift her down. "No kid no more! Moll, you're as heavy as a sack of beans."

"Shore, an' worth aboot as much," retorted Molly.

"You an' me are goin' to have a little confab after supper," he said,

Molly knew there was something in the wind, but she felt only half-frightened. Arch was a puzzle lately. After supper she walked beside him as he led her along the edge of the field toward the creek. When he got to the head of the trail where it led down into the glen toward the spring he halted and said, "Reckon this is far enough. Who was the bully of a cowboy thet waylaid you?"

"Hackamore Jocelyn."

"I reckoned so. Wal, what'd he do, Moll?"

"Arch, I don't *have* to tell you everythin' or anythin'," she said steadily.

"Reckon you don't, to be fair aboot it. But I'm your brother, Molly."

She had never heard him speak like that before.

"Arch, you—you don't trust me," she faltered.

"Molly, are you goin' to make me choke thin's out of you?"

Molly told him bluntly just what she thought of Jocelyn.

"Wal, I'll be dog-goned. I been given to believe you was sweet on him."

"Somebody lied. I haven't any use for Jocelyn. If you want to know, I'll give you the straight goods aboot him—so far as I am concerned—but, Arch, I'd a good deal rather not tell you. It'll make you mad, an' probably run you into another fight."

"Molly, it's no shore bet thet Jocelyn an' I won't fight, anyhow. Seth has been talkin' too much for Jocelyn. He's too anxious. There's somethin' up. It looks to me like Jocelyn wants to double-cross the Diamond an' somehow throw in with the Cibeque. I'm not shore. But I don't take to the puncher. Mebbe I'm cross-grained. Mebbe it's because he throwed a gun heah an' there. All the same, if he'd double-cross Traft he'd shore do the same by us."

Long before Arch had concluded that speech, Molly had made her decision to hold back nothing, though at the suspicion he might presently ask pertinently about Jim Traft her heart came into her throat.

"Arch, you're on the track," she replied swiftly. "Jocelyn has quit the Diamond. Had a fight with—Jim Traft, he said, an' jumped at a chance to quit. He had a black eye, a cut lip, an' some other fist marks. An'—an'—" Here Molly paused to relieve the oppression in her breast, and failed to do it. "Jocelyn tried to bully me into lyin' to you. Wanted me to tell you he's quit the Diamond because—because Jim Traft had insulted me. Then he could throw a gun on Traft!"

Slinger Dunn whistled long and low, and afterwards muttered a deep curse. "Molly, you've shore cleared up part of this heah deal," he said gratefully. "I'll bet a hundred Jocelyn aimed to throw in with the Cibeque."

"That's what he said, Arch," rejoined Molly, and impelled by released emotion, she began at the point when Jocelyn waylaid her on the trail and recalled every word and action of that encounter.

"So much fer Hackamore Jocelyn," muttered Dunn. "I wonder now—I jest wonder what cairds Seth holds—or if it is his deal."

"I wouldn't trust Seth Haverly with his grandma's spectacles," said Molly.

"Wal, Molly, mebbe I'd better take your hunch. But I cain't believe Seth would double-cross me, leastways with a puncher from the Diamond. An' that brings us to real talk. What's this I heah aboot Jim Traft insultin' you?"

"I—I don't know what you heahed, Arch—but it's a lie."

"Did you meet him?"

"Yes, at the fair."

"An' went to thet dance with him?"

"Oh, no. I went with Mrs. See. But Jim Traft came—an' I—I danced with him once."

"An' thet's all? You wasn't out in the moonlight with him, on the porch?"

"Yes—we walked out a—a little."

"An' he grabbed you an' hugged you?" demanded Dunn, leaning down.

"Y-yes, Arch—he did."

"You let him?"

"He's big an' strong—what could I—I do? But at that I slapped him."

"Which was proof you felt insulted. So how's it come you say you wasn't?"

"Listen—Arch—" she gasped. "I—I wasn't honest with him. The truth is—I took to him—somethin' outrageous. An' he must have guessed it. But when he—he had me in his arms

—I hit him. I—I wanted him to believe I *was* insulted. He's taken me for a girl far above one from the Cibeque. But I really wasn't insulted—an' when I hit him I wasn't honest. An'—an'—"

"Took to him somethin' outrageous!" ejaculated Arch incredulously. "Molly Dunn!"

"Yes, Molly Dunn," retorted Molly, gaining courage with resentment. "Even if I do belong to the Dunns of the Cibeque I've got a heart."

"I ain't blamin' you, Moll," he returned as if realizing the inevitableness of the fact. "You're only a kid. An' he's shore a good-lookin' fellar. An' he can talk. But, Molly, the thing is he's old Jim Traft's kin. He's worth a million. An' he couldn't have no honest intent toward you."

"I'm no fool, Arch, if I am a kid," she rejoined. "I know when a man means bad by me. Lord knows I've had reason to. I shore knew today when Jocelyn grabbed me. But Jim Traft didn't mean bad. I swear it."

He shook his shaggy head doggedly. "You cain't tell me honest that Jim Traft didn't make you feel you was Molly Dunn of the Cibeque."

"It hurt like sixty, Arch. But he didn't mean it. There *is* a difference between Molly Dunn of the Cibeque an' Jim Traft from the East—rich, educated, with family name."

"Ahuh. You said it, Molly. Family name. You're daughter of old John Dunn. An' sister to Slinger Dunn!"

"I told him that."

"Before or after?"

"It was after, of course."

"Shore it was. No, Moll, there ain't no overlookin' thet. He was only playin' with you. Shore, in some safer place he'd gone farther."

"*No!*" cried Molly.

"An' you're givin' it away thet you'd let him go as far as he liked."

"Oh, Arch! How can you—talk so!" sobbed Molly. "That's a lie. *You're* insultin' me."

He shook his head gloomily, and averted his blazing eyes, to hide their thought from her. Then he strode away, leaving her there trembling and stricken.

Chapter Twelve

Double-Cross Plan

FOR days Molly lived in a perpetual state of nervous dread of events that had cast their shadows. Arch remained in one of his brooding moods.

Then one morning when Molly came down she saw Arch's horse saddled and carrying a small pack. "Where are you goin', Arch?" she asked at breakfast.

"Up on the Diamond, an' I reckon you better stick around home," he replied gruffly.

"What're you—goin for?" she dared ask.

"Wal, fer one thing, to see if this outfit is lyin' to me. I didn't tell you thet Seth an' his new pard swear they posted a notice up north of the Diamond. They laid down the law fer thet drift fence. The Cibeque wouldn't stand fer the fence goin' farther than the haid of East Fork. Thet's in the saddle just under the Diamond. An' if it was built farther it'd be laid down pronto."

"What else you goin' for?" added Molly anxiously.

"Wal, I reckon you ought to know," he replied, with a dark glance on her.

Molly followed him in trepidation out to his horse, where her mother would not hear. She laid a trembling hand on him as he was about to mount. She did not know what to say. But terror of something possessed her. "Arch, if you really love me you—you won't—"

He stared down at her, arrested by her agitation if not her words. "Who ever said anythin' aboot me lovin' you?"

"No one. But you *do*, don't you?" she implored. "Somebody must love me or—or I cain't live."

"You seem to've been tolerable healthy all along," he drawled.

"I've only you to help me, Arch," she went on swiftly. "I'm tryin' hard not to run true to what they expect of Molly Dunn. An' I can't be drove too far. I'll hate you if—if you—"

But he was flint. "You have run true to the Dunns, I reckon," he replied bitterly, and rode away.

For three endless days there came no word of Slinger Dunn. But on the third day, in the village with her mother, Molly heard that her brother was there, drunk and quarrelsome. At the store she met Andy Stoneham, who was a clerk for Enoch Summers. While waiting upon Molly, he contrived to whisper, "Heaps goin' on, an' hadn't I better come out tonight?" Molly nodded, and joined her mother.

Old Enoch was full of talk. "Did you heah the latest aboot Jim Traft, Mrs. Dunn? Wal, it's shore news. Young Traft has had notices put up thet he'd make no claim to cattle already drifted down into Sycamore Canyon. His drift fence has crossed the head of the Sycamore an' is now out on the Diamond, an' movin right along."

"Is *that* all the news?" said Mrs. Dunn indifferently.

"Wal, most folks is agreed thet Jim Traft was shore more than square to the Cibeque when he done thet," went on Summers. "Mebbe there's more'n a thousand haid of steers, let alone cows an' calves, in the brakes of Sycamore. Seth Haverley an' his outfit sold near two hundred two-year-olds hyar yesterday. Forty-eight dollars a haid!

"Forty-eight a head!" ejaculated Mrs. Dunn, who appeared to be conjuring with figures. "Arch was in on that?"

"Wal, it seems not. He'd had a fallout with the Cibeque, or somethin'. Anyway, he was in town last night. It was Slinger who busted in here with news thet the drift fence had reached Tobe's Well. It shore upset all reckonin's around West Fork. Tobe's Well is way out on the Diamond."

While her mother completed her purchases, Molly waited in the grip of conflicting feelings. She could not help a thrill to hear Jim Traft kindly spoken of, nor a start at the information he had passed Sycamore Canyon with his fence. This was the deadline drawn by the riders of the brakes. Traft had disregarded their notice. Molly calculated that he was then actually within ten miles of West Fork, and not more than 40 from the east end of the Diamond.

After supper that evening she waited at the gate for Andy, something she had never before done.

"Shucks!" he ejaculated. "It's different when you want suthin' of somebody, ain't it, Molly?"

"I reckon so, Andy. You see what

bein' friendly does. I'm doin' a heap of worryin' an I'm just low-down enough to want your help."

"Wal, you've cause to worry, Molly Dunn," he said. "Let's get out of sight somewhere. I'm plumb scared of thet Hackamore Jocelyn."

Molly led him back of the cabin along the edge of the clearing to the creek and halted beside a huge fallen pine.

"Molly, last night I happened on suthin' thets got me scared stiff," he began. "After work I went up the crick to ketch a mess of trout. An' as I was comin' back along the crick trail I seen Seth Haverly an' some riders. I ducked into the brush an' squatted down. I reckoned they'd pass. But I'm a son-of-a-gun if they didn't stop in a little glade not forty steps from where I hid. With Seth was his brother Sam, an' Hack Jocelyn. The Haverlys stayed in their saddles, but Jocelyn got off. He acted uneasy. An' he walked up an' down the trail. They was waitin' for some one."

"I'll bet it was Arch," said Molly.

"It shore was. Wal, fust off, Jocelyn swore Slinger wouldn't come, an' Seth said he would. Molly, they stayed there till dark an' I could repeat every blame word they said. But heah short an' sweet is what it all means: Hack Jocelyn has got in with the Cibeque outfit, an' they're aimin' to double-cross Slinger. They're goin to cut the drift fence an' lay the blame onto Slinger. They're goin' to kidnap Jim Traft an' squeeze a big ransom out of his uncle. Thet's the stake Jocelyn is playin' fer. But I seen, if Seth couldn't, thet Hack is playin' a deeper game than they savvy. Mebbe Slinger is onto him. 'Cause Slinger wouldn't heah of Jocelyn throwin' in with the Cibeque. He wouldn't go in the cattle drive they're plannin'. Thet all came out in their talk before Slinger got there."

"Oh—did he come?" cried Molly breathlessly.

"Yep. Jest before dark. Hart Merriwell an' Boyd Flick was with him. 'Seth,' says Slinger, cool-like, 'I'm splittin' with the Cibeque. No hard feelin's. You've got mebbe a better man than me in Jocelyn. Anyway, I cain't take the share of this cattle money you sent me. Much obliged, Seth. An' heah it is.'

"An' then Seth says," went on Andy after a pause, "'All right, Slinger. You're shore your own boss. An' if there's no hard feelin's on your side there's shore none on mine. But you ought to come in on thet kidnapin' deal. Why, it's a gold mine. Old Jim Traft won't blink an eye at a hundred thousand.'"

"Slinger owned it was a pretty slick deal an' easy money, but he jest couldn't see it thet way.

"'An' there's more'n one reason, but particular with me is thet I happen to be goin' to shoot Jim Traft,' says Slinger.

"'So we figgered', says Seth, 'but cain't you wait till we've got thet ransom money?'

"'Nope,' replies Slinger. 'I don't like the deal. An' if I happen to run into any of you Cibeque gents up on the Diamond, I'll take particular offense. Savvy thet?'

"'We ain't deaf, Slinger. But I, fer one, am shore plumb surprised,' answers Seth, slick-like.

"'Wal,' went on Slinger, 'I've been sort of surprised myself, lately.' An' he shore said it full of meanin'. Slinger rode away then, an'—"

"You heahed all this last night?" interrupted Molly.

"Yes, before sundown."

"But we heahed Slinger was drunk!"

"Nary drunk. Somebody lied to you. He was as cool an' hard as ice. Those fellars was scared of him, Molly. I haven't seen him since. Now to go on with what happened. You never heerd such oussin'. Some from Seth an' most from Jocelyn. Then they got their haids together again. It was all right with them aboot Slinger goin' to kill young Traft. But they didn't want that to spoil their stake. An' they reckoned they'd have to give up the ransom idee. Hack Jocelyn busts in then with another. An' it was that if Slinger did queer their kidnap deal by killin' Traft, they'd have a chance to rustle a big bunch of stock an' lay thet onto Slinger, also. This struck Seth an' his brother all right. An' they won over the other two fellars. Then they started off. One of the horses must have smelled me for he shied an' didn't come far from jumpin' on me.

"By this time I was pretty scared an' I up an' tore through the brush. Mebbe Jocelyn didn't let out a roar. An' he shot three times after me. I don't want no bullets closer to me."

"Oh, Andy, they'll find you out," cried Molly fearfully.

"Wal, mebbe, but I don't see how they can. I'd hate to have thet Hack Jocelyn meet up with me very soon, an' you bet I'll see him fust."

"But Jim Traft will never see *Slinger* first," wailed Molly.

"I reckon not. Molly, ain't you a little over-concerned aboot Traft?" asked Andy.

"No more than I am about Slinger," retorted Molly. "It's an awful mess. Oh, Andy, what can I do?"

"Molly, you might let on you heerd all this yourself. I reckon Slinger would believe you. Shore he would. An' thet'd let me out. I'm plumb afraid of Hackamore Jocelyn. He's got it in fer me because of you."

"Andy, I'll not give you away," said Molly earnestly. "An' I'm shore owin' you a good deal. Yes, I ought to tell Slinger. Oh, I must think—

"Andy, I'll go back now. I don't want to risk missin' him."

She went as far as the gate with him. "Andy, you've been good to me lately," she said. "An' I like you for it. I haven't a friend in all this valley, unless it's you. I wish I could be more to you. But I—I cain't."

Bidding him good night, she ran back to the cabin.

"You better come a-runnin'," came a slow, cool voice from the gloom. "Who was thet with you? Looked like Andy."

"Oh Arch—" panted Molly, feeling her way to the porch. "Yes, it was Andy."

"Pa had one of his sinkin' spells tonight," said Arch, "I been sittin' heah thinkin', Molly. What're you goin' to do—when we bust up?"

"Oh—Arch!" faltered Molly, and she felt for his hand, slipping hers into it.

"Might as well face it," he went on. "I'm goin to get killed or have to leave the Cibeque country. Pa won't last long. An' Ma will go back to Illinois. Will you go back with her?"

Molly pondered a long moment. "I wouldn't if she didn't make me. I'd hate to leave heah. Arch, I can get work in Flag."

"Shore. An' it ain't a bad idee. But

don't get any moonshine idees in your haid."

"What you mean, Arch?"

"Wal, aboot Jim Traft. Because you'll be in fer a heap more hurt than you've had."

Molly had fortified herself for the very thing hinted in his slow drawl, nevertheless it made her blood run cold. "I'm shore in for more hurt any way you look at it," she said sadly.

"Natural like. Life ain't no *fiesta* fer the Dunns. If I'd only knowed when I was a kid what I know now!"

Molly thought the moment propitious. "Arch, the Cibeque outfit is goin' to double-cross you. Hack Jocelyn is at the bottom of it. But Seth Haverly is as treacherous. They want you to throw in with them an' kidnap Jim Traft. Hold him for ransom. Course you know this, because you refused to be in it. But there's a lot you don't know."

"Wal, you darned little wood mouse!" he ejaculated. "You was there last night? What was thet shootin' aboot, after I left?"

"Hack Jocelyn heahed a noise in the brush an' shot three times."

"Wal! I come darn near ridin' back. Molly, what did you heah?"

Briefly then she told him what had happened along the trail, as related by Andy; and though the supposition was that she had been there she actually did not lie.

"Arch, it couldn't be no worse," went on Molly in agitation. "They mean to cut the drift fence an' lay it on to you. An' if the ransom deal falls through—owin' to you killin' Jim Traft—they'll rustle a big bunch of cattle. An' it'll be laid on you!"

She felt him freeze, and he was silent so long that she could not restrain an appeal for him to abandon an idea of revenge and to go away somewhere.

"An' leave it easy fer them?" he queried harshly. "I know their deal now—I'll settle with them afterward." He slipped off the porch. His moccasined feet made no sound and his dark form vanished in the gloom.

Molly clapped a hand over her mouth. Of what avail to call out! Shaken and wretched, she climbed to her loft and crawled to her bed. Through the hours of distress that followed, one growing resolve at last found permanence, and then she slept.

In the gray of dawn she was peering down from the loft, watching Slinger Dunn—while he rolled out of his bed on the porch and pulled on his boots and buckled on his spurs and gun-belt—while he slipped off in the gloom to return with his horse—while he packed blankets and biscuit and meat, and then rode away on his mission.

Molly sat there, thinking out her plan. She would let Slinger get some miles ahead, then she would follow, climb the Diamond, and when some distance from Tobe's Well she would make a detour and hit the trail beyond Traft's camp, and ride back to it.

Before her mother was up, Molly put on her buckskins and slipped down out of the loft with a blanket, which she carried out to the barn and strapped on her pony. She fed him grain. Then she coiled a lasso and tied it to the end of his halter.

After breakfast, the first moment that offered, she ran to the barn, and leading Jigger out she mounted him and rode into the woods. Soon she

came to the trail, in the dust of which she espied the tracks of Slinger's horse, and turning, she rode north. Jigger was not shod and his hoofs padded softly.

At every turn of the trail Molly would peep around before going on. Always, too, she had a keen eye for Slinger's tracks. After a few miles the forest changed and thickened.

Presently she missed Slinger's tracks in the dust of the trail. Molly rode back, bending in anxious scrutiny. She had been careless. Soon she found where he had turned out of the trail. Molly slipped off her horse. What could this mean? She dared not go on for fear she might get ahead of him. Perhaps he was going to climb the Diamond by a trail known only to himself. Molly stood in dismay, pondering the problem.

Suddenly a rifle shot clear and sharp up the trail gave her a violent start. A wild cry followed. Molly stood transfixed. Then came the clatter of rapid hoof beats. She drew her horse behind a thicket of pines.

Chapter Thirteen

More Fists

JIM TRAFT, resting on the soft, fragrant mat behind a spruce tree, and waiting for the call to supper, inadvertently heard conversation not intended for his ears.

"Nope. You cain't deal no more cairds to me," Curly Prentiss was saying to some one. "I won't take a hand in any more deals against the boss."

"But, Curly, we all reckon you wasn't at your best when he licked you," rejoined Uphill Frost.

"How so?"

"Wal, you'd been drunk. An' you know how weak likker makes you. An' you was sort of in fun. You didn't get mad."

A silence betrayed that no doubt this eloquence and persuasion were balm to Curly's wounded vanity.

"Mebbe so. Doggone. But he hit me on the nose an' seen how it hurt. Then he kept pokin' me again right there. An' thet's what he'll do to you, Up. An' you, Jack Way, if you pick a fight with our boss, Gawd help you! You've not got a well bone in your body. An' ev'ry time he cracks you with one of them big fists, you'll yell. I'll bet a month's pay."

"Take you up. Heah thet, Frost?" grumbled Way. "Fact is, though, I'm afeared he *will* lick me. He shore put it all over Lonestar last Saturday. But we gotta fight him. *Somebody* has gotta do it or the Diamond is done fer on the range. Hack Jocelyn says so an' Hack's an old-timer heah."

"You'd be smart not to listen to him," replied Curly in lower tone. "Hack's out fer trouble. Not fun! He's stuck on Molly Dunn an' he cain't stand fer the Flag talk aboot the boss winnin' Molly. There'll be a fight one of these days an will be a *real* one. An' I wanna see it."

"Natural you'd like to see Hack get licked proper," growled Frost.

"You can shore bet on thet," said Curly emphatically.

"I'm gonna pick a fight with him, anyway," concluded Up Frost. "He's sore at me an' it'll be easy."

"When you aim to pick it?"

"I had my mind made up more'n

once. But when I get near the son-of-a-gun, I don't stick to it".

"Ahuh. You jest cain't help likin' Jim Traft. If Hack Jocelyn wasn't in the outfit we'd all be for the boss pronto."

The cowboys strolled away into camp, arguing and complaining, while Jim Traft lay there amused and touched and singularly pleased.

The call to supper disturbed his reverie. He got up, and keeping the thick, low-spreading spruce tree between him and camp he walked off into the woods and circling, came back to camp on the other side. Meantime he had evolved a plan.

He found the boys at supper, and a sudden cessation of voices proved he had interrupted something unusual, for cowboys seldom talked during their brief meal time.

"Sorry to spoil your talk, boys," he said, "but I can't go without my meals to let you gab about me."

"We was only talkin' aboot the fence," put in Frost. "Me an' Jack stand by our argyment of this mawnin'. You're runnin' thet line wrong lately, keepin' to this thick woods hyar."

"Well, tomorrow we'll run off a way, then, into the open draws. And I'll give you and Jack the job of digging postholes for a few days."

A long howl of mirth made the welkin ring. After that had subsided Uphill and Jackson rendered the air blue around camp.

Jim stood it a while and then, though it was not out of the ordinary, he pretended to take exception to such profanity. "Shut your dirty mouths," he ordered. "If you want to rave you can do it without such cuss words."

"What-at!" bawled Uphill. "Ain't this hyar a free range? Cain't I open my mouth?"

"Why don't you eat with it? This is supper time. And the rest of us are hungry."

"You heered thet, Jack?" roared Up, in real or assumed wrath.

"I shore did," yelled Jack.

Whereupon the two of them burst out into another long string of profanity. Jim got up and deliberately punched Uphill in the mouth and then Jack. That effectually stilled the profanity.

"After supper I'll oblige you boys with all the satisfaction you want," said Jim, sitting down again.

Hackamore Jocelyn broke the silence. "So the Diamond's come to this!" he exclaimed in derision. "My Gawd! No wonder we're the talk of the range."

Jim bent a clear straight gaze upon his one real enemy. "Jocelyn, the Diamond is doing fine, according to reports from Flag," he said deliberately. "And I can see how it could do better."

"Ahuh. So can I," replied Jocelyn, with far less subtlety than Jim's.

"Aw, hell," interposed Bud Chalfack, "there ain't no outfit on the range thet could run this drift fence."

"Wal, cowboy, you mean *would* run it, an' thet's no lie," returned Jocelyn sneeringly.

Uphill Frost finished his meal in remarkably quick time for him. And he arose to make most elaborate preparations for the fray.

Jim got up with alacrity, and threw off his vest. "Come on. Let's get it over," he said. "We've fence to build, you know."

After a few passes at each other Uphill swung in like a snorting bull, and Jim, making a feint with his right, came up hard with his left. It connected.

"Wow!" yelled Curly.

Up had begun valiantly, evidently adhering to a preconceived plan of battle. They danced around, and presently Jim ran in to take a couple of blows in order to plant another, at the pit of Up's stomach. *Biff!* It had a solid sound. Up let out a groan. From that instant he left his face and head wholly unguarded, endeavoring to stem the attack on his lower anatomy.

Jim took the fight in hand then. "You cussin' cowpuncher," he said, imitating the vernacular of his men. "You lazy hole-diggin' gopher! Take this one in the gizzard."—*Wham!*— "You bowlegged, biscuit-eatin' rhinooscerosss!" — *Pop!*— "Right on the kisser! Forgot you had a face, hey, Up? Look out now." *Crack! Smack! —Zugg!*

That last one, a solid blow over Up's rather stout middle, elicited an awful groan from him. He sagged, and bent forward like a jacknife.

Jim lowered his fists. "Have you got enough?"

"Aplenty," groaned Up.

"All right, then, provided you call it square for keeps and shake hands. Otherwise—"

"Boss," interupted Frost hastily, "I've b'en ag'in you, jest natural an' cussed. But there was no sense in it. An' hyar you are!" Uphill showed the true manliness back of his contrary, cowboy, cantankerous spirit.

"Now, Jack, come on. It's the only way for us to settle the difficulty."

"I reckon so, boss," returned Jack ruefully. "But it ain't fair. My pore body has too many sprains an' dislocations an' cracks to stand your hammerin'. All the same, I'll take my medicine."

And he did take it, putting up a better fight than Frost's, though of obvious pain to himself and less fun for the cowboys. Presently Jim caught him in the ribs.

Jack went down in a heap, rolled over, and laboriously sat up, his face ashen. "Jim—it was—bad enough—hittin' all my other — places," he panted. "But them busted—ribs! I knowed you'd find them. Would you mind—callin' it off fer keeps?"

"If you want," replied Jim. "But I reckon I'd like to soak you some more."

"Aw, no! Take it out on Hackamore," replied Jack beseechingly, and he got up to offer his hand to Jim.

His suggestion instantly charged the atmosphere with something more compelling.

"Strikes me," said Jim quickly. "How about it, Jocelyn? You've a sore head. You've been mean and full of poison talk. And I haven't been as decent as I might have been. Let's have a whack at each other. It can't do any harm and it might do good."

"I wouldn't soil my gloves on you. Mister Traft," drawled Jocelyn with undisguised malignity.

That incident marked the definite break between Jim and Jocelyn. Both Bud and Curly had warned Jim to let Hack alone to take his own time. They assured Jim that Hack would go presently, but they could not quite figure just what he was up to. Jim was glad of their advice and this late evidence of friendship. It seemed, indeed, that Jocelyn was now

the only thorn in the flesh of the Diamond. Day by day he became more alienated from Cherry Winters and Hump Stevens, who had been the last of his stand-bys.

Another Saturday came. Some of the boys went to Flagerstown. Hack had disappeared before daylight, and according to Bud and Curly his horse tracks led south.

"Boss, he's gone to West Fork," claimed Bud, with a wise look.

"Shore as you're born," agreed Curly, wagging his bright head.

"Curly, let's ride down there, too," suggested Bud.

The idea found favor with Curly.

"Go, by all means," replied Jim, and he found himself fighting an almost irresistible longing to go with them.

That was the longest weekend Jim had put in since his advent in Arizona. He was on pins and needles until Bud and Curly returned, late Sunday night. To his disappointment, they seemed uncommunicative and brought no news of any moment. They had not seen Hackamore Jocelyn. They did not mention either Slinger or Molly Dunn. They reported considerably more cattle than they had expected to run across. Numerous dead cows and old carcasses, none of which had been killed by wolves or lions, lying in the open along the trails, attested to a changed and startling condition of affairs since the drift fence had been commenced.

Jim was too sick at heart to go into the subject of stolen stock any deeper that night. What had he expected of the boys? When he lay alone in the dark, he confessed to himself that he had yearned for even a word of Molly Dunn. Next morning at an opportune moment he asked Bud about her.

"Shore I seen Molly," replied the cowboy frankly. "At the village. But she didn't see me.

"Did you hear anything about Hack?"

"Yep. An' it ain't good news," replied Bud soberly. "I wanted to tell you, an' Curly talked ag'in' it."

"Jocelyn went to see Molly Dunn," asserted Jim quietly.

"He shore did, which ain't none of our bizness, since thet little devil has no use for us. But, boss, this is damn queer: Hack is makin' up to the Haverlys. An' thet means the Cibeque outfit!"

"Well, what of it? I wish he'd quit us, as he's hinted."

"What of it? Gosh! I don't know. But if Hack quits us I'll shore tell you what Curly an' I think."

Hackamore Jocelyn did not ride into camp until late Monday night. This was breaking rules, and Jim saw that the cowboys were keen to get his reaction to it.

"Where've you been, Jocelyn?" he asked.

"Down in the brakes to see my gurl," replied the cowboy, almost gayly.

"Why didn't you get back Sunday night, same as Curly and Bud? They went down to West Fork."

In a twinkling Jocelyn was his old self. "Wal, if you want to know I was havin' too sweet a time with Molly."

"I'm not inquiring into your private affairs," said Jim coldly. "But if you take another day off without permission, I'll fire you—do you understand?"

"Wal, I ain't hard of hearin', Mister Traft," replied Jocelyn softly.

No more was said. Jocelyn ate his supper alone. The cowboys sat silent. Jim sought his bed presently, and tried to find ease from his pain in slumber.

The drift fence went on mile after mile, and one camp followed another. Early in August, young Jim Traft, acting solely upon his own judgment and responsibility, celebrated his fencing off the many heads of Sycamore Canyon from the brakes of the Cibeque by posting notices that the Diamond would lay no further claim to stock in and north of Sycamore, and west of the drift fence.

It was a strategic move on Jim's part. It caught the fancy of every cowboy in his outfit, excepting Jocelyn, who, nevertheless, was staggered by it. Jim won his cowboys by that act, and further alienated Jocelyn. The homesteaders called at his camp, unmistakably friendly and grateful. They all profited by it. One of them told Bud that he could now make a good start at ranching.

"He was stealin' a few cattle," vowed Bud, "an' he admitted it. Any honest cattleman will admit he's run a few haid not strictly his. Doggone it boys, Jim Traft has hit one plumb center."

In mid-August the drift fence, now up on the great triangular promontory, received its first setback from enemies. Half a dozen stretches, where it crossed the heads of Rocky Canyon, had been laid low, with wire cut and hopelessly tangled, and posts broken down. Two days of hard labor were required to repair the damage.

"Boss, let me trail them hoss tracks," begged Curly Prentiss. "I can find out in two days who cut our wire."

"Suppose you do, Curly. What good will that do?"

"Wal, we can stop it from happenin' ag'in. An' we cain't help matters by waitin'. Bud an' I agree it's thet Cibeque outfit, though we cain't prove it."

"Prentiss," spoke up Jocelyn bitingly, "I reckon you know it's onhealthy to speak names when you cain't prove nothin'."

"Hack, I can shore prove one thing damn pronto," snapped Curly. "I take offense at your speakin' up fer the Cibeque."

"Ahuh. But what does thet prove?"

"It proves you can git my game any minnit."

"Wal, if thet's so there ain't any helluva rush. I've a date with my gurl, Molly, on Sunday, an I shore wouldn't want to miss thet."

"Aw, you're a liar, Hack!" retorted Curly passionately.

Jim got between the two, and by backing Curly away from the campfire he prevented more trouble for the present.

"Boss, he makes me see red," raved Curly, when they were alone. "I could uv stood his crack aboot the Cibeque, but he's all the time throwin' poor little Molly Dunn up to me. I liked her orful well, Jim. An' I cain't believe she's thick with him. What chance has thet pore kid had? Her father's no good. An' they say her mother will cook her eye at a cowboy. An' Slinger Dunn! He'd be enough to ruin any gurl."

Jim made no immediate reply. "Curly, I wish I were as much of a man as you are," he said presently.

"Aw, boss, thet's nonsense! You

shore are an' more," burst out Curly, nonplussed, yet pleased. "It's bin a drill fer you—this Diamond job. But the outfit's with you. Honest, Jim, an' heah's my hand on it. We cain't count Jocelyn. I reckon you'd better fire him pronto."

"Curly, I couldn't answer for my temper—if I faced him again to-night," replied Jim unsteadily. "Perhaps tomorrow or soon."

"Jim, ain't you takin' this hombre too serious? After all, you're boss of the Diamond. An' who's Hack Jocelyn?"

"It's not *who* he is, but what he *claims*, that's dug into me," replied Jim frankly.

"Claims! You mean aboot Molly?" asked Curly incredulously. "Fust Bud, an' then me, an' now you! Aw! Who'd ever thunk it?"

Chapter Fourteen

Shot Down!

THE day came when Jim Traft had his first look at the country from the rim of the Diamond. He gazed long, and ever his eyes traveled back to the picturesque little homestead in the bend of the Cibeque, where he imagined Molly Dunn lived.

On the way back to camp, while riding across one of the grassy draws which headed on the western side of the Diamond, Jim found a placard nailed to a tree. It was identical with one Hackamore Jocelyn had brought in from the head of Sycamore, and its crude misspelled message read the same—the Cibeque specified the limit for the drift fence. This notice, however, had a round black spot in the center. Upon tearing the placard loose Jim saw that the spot was a bullet hole. It stirred a curious heat in his veins. And he was reminded of Curly's admonition not to ride around alone through the forest.

"An' please take another hunch from me. From this next camp we're makin' I'm advisin' you to have one man whose job is to keep back off the fence line an' watch."

"That's not a bad idea, Curly," replied Jim. "You can take turns, one man a day."

Another Saturday arrived, and at noonday, when the cowboys knocked off for the week, Jocelyn, with more than usual of his donning his best and gaudiest, made a parade of his start for West Fork.

Jeff Davis, the "dumb" cook, electrified Jim and prostrated the cowboys. "I'm a quiet man an' I like peace," he began in a perfectly clear and resonant voice. "Thet's why I never talk. But that —— a Jocelyn has got me riled. An' if some of you —— cowpunchers don't shet him up, I'll slip some coyote poison in the —— meat!"

Such profanity had never before been heard in the Diamond camp, at least since Jim had taken charge. The boys gave the cook wide-eyed and gaping stares; then they whooped like Indians and rolled on the ground.

"Our tongue-tied cook!"

"Deaf and *dumb!* Haw! Haw!"

"An' mebbe he cain't cuss!"

No other of the Diamond outfit left camp that week-end. They had a lazy, jolly time of it, interspersed with some thoughtful conferences about the obstacles ahead.

On Sunday Bud took Jim fishing and Curly begged to go too. They had a great day on the brook, and it wanted an hour to sunset when they arrived in camp.

To Jim's amazement Hack Jocelyn had just ridden in and had kicked his chaps off. Jim's quick eye noted the cowboy's gun-belt hanging on the pommel of his saddle. The sight seemed to make every fiber in Jim leap. Jocelyn presented a marked contrast to the debonair braggart of a courtier who had left for West Fork only the day before. His garb looked as if he had slept in a hayloft. His face was haggard, dark and sullen. Not many hours past he had been under the influence of liquor.

Jim caught the tail end of a speech that drew him up, strung and sharp. In a few strides he was upon Jocelyn, and with hard hand jerked him round. "Were you speaking of Molly Dunn?" he demanded.

"Wal, if it's any of your damn mix, yes, I was," returned Jocelyn deliberately.

"Jocelyn, you're fired," rang out Jim.

"Nope. Beat you to it, Traft. I quit," replied Jocelyn.

"All right. Get out of my camp. You can't even eat here."

"Traft, thet ain't Western—to send a man out hungry," said Jocelyn darkly.

"Is it Western to speak vilely of a girl?" flashed Jim hotly.

"Depends on thet gurl, Mister Traft."

Then Jim lunged out with all the fury of might and grief. His big fist covered one of Jocelyn's malignant eyes. The cowboy fell over the bench, knocking Winters down. Jim leaped after them, and plunged upon Jocelyn, to kick him fiercely, and then fall on him like a battering ram.

Curly was the first to leap and grasp Jim. But he could do nothing. "Help, somebody!" he yelled. "Bulldog him, Bud! There! Why, boss, shore you'd killed the fellar. Come now—you shore lost your temper."

Between them they dragged Jim off the bloody-faced Jocelyn, who sat up groggily.

"Some of you—lead him out of—camp," panted Jim, struggling for breath. "Then come back for his horse and pack—and his wages, too."

Jim turned away unsteadily, with Bud still holding his arm. They crossed to where Jim had his bed and pack.

"Boys, I couldn't stand him any longer. I couldn't," broke out Jim, spreading wide his hands. "I suppose he'll kill me, but I couldn't have done otherwise."

"Wal, Jim, it's *done*," rejoined Curly. "He's shore slated for wuss company. I'll bet my spurs Slinger Dunn will kill him. But the thing fer you to make up your mind aboot is—if you ever meet Jocelyn ag'in, no matter where, grab your gun an' begin to shoot. Savvy?"

"Boss, will you promise to do thet little trick?" asked Bud earnestly.

"Yes, boys, I promise," replied Jim.

"Fine an' dandy," declared Curly. "You're no slouch with a gun an' Hack ain't so much. It'd been plumb murder fer me to draw on him. But the chances are slim you'll ever meet up with Jocelyn alone. If he gets in the Cibeque an' Slinger Dunn stands fer it—which I'll gamble he won't—he'll be jumpin' out of the fryin' pan into the fire. The Cibeque will be the wuss off with Jocelyn. They'll cut our fence

an' rustle our stock. An', boss, if you don't hold the Diamond back, every damn one of thet two-bit outfit will be daid or in jail before the snow flies."

"Boss," added Bud impressively, "Curly an' I know right now thet the Haverlys are cuttin' our fence an' rustlin' our cattle. We didn't ride down to West Fork fer nothin'."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Wal, you had trouble enough. An' we reckoned we'd keep it as long as we could."

"If you give me proofs I—I'll not hold the Diamond back," declared Jim, and probably that decision marked the moment when the West claimed him for its own.

"Wal, we cain't lay a hand on proof jest this minnit, but it'll shore come," replied Bud.

The Diamond pushed on to Tobe's Well, which was the end of the road. The well was a huge crystal spring at the upper end of the clearing and the wonderful flow of water boiled and bubbled up in the center.

On the second day at Tobe's Well the drift fence was run below and around this famous water hole and back up on the Diamond. The sixth day from that fell to Jim as his turn for the scout duty he had initiated. He had saddled and mounted while the others were at breakfast.

"Boss, how fur do you aim to ride back along the line?" asked Bud.

"I'll make for Sycamore, strike the fence, and work this way," replied Jim.

"Wal, keep your eye peeled," said Curly gruffly.

Jim wheeled his horse off into the pines, conscious that his full heart could not quite attain the joy of realization.

Arriving at Sycamore, he rode west a short distance until he came to the fence, when he turned south to follow it. He walked his horse, and peered ahead with keen eyes. He covered several miles in this cautious manner and came out on the bank of a swampy swale, from which water drained down into Rocky Canyon.

Jim found the fence down in a section clear across this gateway to the brakes. He really had not expected to find a cut, and, hard on his surprise and dismay, roused his slumbering wrath.

He proceeded, though less cautiously, with his rifle across the pommel. And along toward noon he rode down the wooded slope under Tobe's Well. Cattle were working down here, too. Not drifting! Jim prepared himself for another surprise. The bottle-neck width of Tobe's Canyon had been sheared of its wire fence. A clean-cut job it was, every wire strand having been cut on each side of trees and posts.

Jim descried fresh hoof tracks in the dim, seldom-used trail. Such was his wrath now that he followed them, keeping on the grass and under the pines, where his horse walked quietly.

Suddenly his horse elevated his ears and stopped. The trail ran straight for 20 paces, and turned at a huge brown pine. A man stepped out, silent as a shadow. Jim recognized the lithe buckskin-clad form, the dark face, the eyes like holes that exposed fire behind. He leveled a gun,

took deliberate aim, while Jim froze in his saddle.

He saw red belch from the gun. A sharp impact as from a violent gust of wind struck him. Then a terrific shock, a tearing rend of flesh, a thundering crash! Jim's horse plunged to throw him.

Chapter Fifteen

Molly Dunn, Samaritan

VIOLENT collision with ground or tree ended Jim's acute consciousness. His first sensations afterward were the chill of water on his face and a burning pain in his breast. Then he felt hands on his forehead.

He forced his weighted eyelids open, to see bright sunshine and spread of foliage over him. He lay half sitting up against a log. Beside him knelt a girl. She uttered a broken cry.

"Molly Dunn!" Jim's voice was not very strong. She straightened up a little so the light struck her face. It appeared pale and convulsed, with big dark eyes dilated in horror. Both her little hands were red with blood. This fully clarified Jim's stunned faculties. "Am I bad hurt?"

"Oh—I don't know! I—I'm afraid!" she cried.

"Show me where I'm shot."

"Your breast—heah!"

Jim's shirt was open. It took nerve to feel for the wound. His whole breast burned. A wet scarf lay pressed tight over his heart. Blood had saturated his clothes. It was flowing freely. Then his fingers located a hole in his flesh that seemed on fire.

Despite the shock to his wits, Jim knew he had not been shot through or near the heart. The bullet hole ranged upwards. Had it missed his lungs? The moment was fraught with terror. He localized the sharpest pain higher up. The bullet had come out on top of his left shoulder. From here the blood poured. Something cold and ghastly released its clutch upon Jim.

"Bullet—glanced," he muttered. Then he asked if there was any other wound.

"You hit on your haid," replied the girl.

"Molly, I'll not die," he said.

"Thank God! I—I was so terribly frightened. What can I do?"

"You had water here?"

"I filled your hat at the brook."

"Tear this scarf in strips," directed Jim. "You'll find a clean one in my pocket—inside—now tear that—and fold into pads. You've only to wash off the blood—and bind the pads on tight."

She complied with his instructions, without hesitation, though her hands shook. "But this top hole! You're bleedin' so!"

"Put one of the pads over it. Press tight. Now I'll hold it there. Knot the strips—slip under my arm—over my shoulder. Now the other pad—and tie tight."

The difficult task was at length accomplished. Molly sat back on her heels, plainly weak.

Jim felt faint, and he was suffering severe pain, both of which circumstances in the thrilling agitation of the moment seemed nothing to be concerned about.

"I must get you back off the trail heah," she spoke up suddenly.

"Yes. If you help me, I can manage," he replied. With her assistance he labored to his feet and walked, leaning on her. His head swam, and when the girl stopped to let him down it was none too soon for Jim. He spoke, but apparently she did not hear. Then his sight cleared. She was coming with water in his sombrero.

"You aboot fainted that time, Mister Jim," she said, lifting his head so he could drink.

"I—should—smile," whispered Jim, as he lay back. Presently he had recovered again. "What—happened?" he asked. "Do you know who shot me?"

She hung her head.

"You needn't tell me. I know. It was your brother, Slinger Dunn. He stepped out from behind a tree—didn't seem in any hurry. But I was paralysed. I forgot I had a gun."

"Mister Jim, you needn't let Slinger off on my account," she interrupted.

"I'll have something to say to him when I'm all right again," declared Jim grimly. "What'd the— Why did he shoot me? On account of this drift fence?"

"No. Reckon it was aboot me."

"You!"

"Shore. It's gone all over the country—what you did—what *we* did—that night of the dance—out on the porch."

"Bud Chalfack—the devil!" ejaculated Jim, stirringly aware of Molly's scarlet blush. "He told it! Oh, I'm sorry, Molly! That was such a—a crazy thing for me to do."

"Reckon I was just aboot as crazy," she replied generously and smiled just a little wistfully. "But Slinger didn't heah what *I* did—and' he shore wouldn't believe me. I was scared he'd choke it out of me."

"What does he think, Molly?"

"It couldn't be no worse, Mister Jim."

"The damn blockhead! I'll make it my business to hunt Mister Slinger up."

"Oh, don't do that! I beg you!" she implored. "Arch is the most awfulest man when he's mad."

"I didn't know whether he was mad or not, but he sure looked awful," replied Jim, forcing a laugh. "Molly Dunn, how'd you happen to come along here and find me?"

"Slinger just the same as told me he'd kill you," she replied, grave, dark eyes on him. "I waited this mawnin' till he was gone. Then I trailed him. My plan was to keep behind him till we were up on top, then I'd ride off the trail an' go around to your camp. I wanted to warn you aboot Slinger.

"How'd you happen to find me?"

"I trailed Slinger to where his tracks went off into the woods. Then I stopped. Pretty soon I heahed a shot—then a cry—then a horse comin' my way fast. I hid behind a spruce. An' I seen Slinger ride by. I didn't know what had happened. But I tied my horse an' slipped up the trail. First I saw your horse. He was makin' off, draggin' his bridle. Then I found you lyin' by a tree. You'd fallen off an' hit your haid."

She released her hand from his and gently touched Jim's head above his temple, where even a slight pressure caused him pain. "I'd better fetch your horse," she added, rising.

"Don't go far or stay long," said Jim.

The slight buckskin-clad form vanished in the green. And only then did Jim take note of his surroundings. He lay in a sort of lean-to made of

spruce boughs, dead and brown. He could see one small bit of blue sky; all the rest was green. He heard a low murmur of running water. The place was secluded, and redolent of dry sweet pine needles.

Soft thuds on the ground made Jim aware that Molly was returning with his horse. They ceased. Then he heard a rustling sound, and then the soft flop of leather. Next she appeared with his saddle blankets, his coat, and his gun, which she deposited by his side. How pretty, slim, and graceful she looked in buckskin!

"You must go home at once. Don't let anybody see you. Will you come back tomorrow?"

"Yes," she replied gravely.

"Thank you. Better fetch some medicine. I'm going to be pretty sick. And some clean linen to bandage my bullet holes."

"There's a canteen on your saddle," she said, and stepped outside the shack to procure it. Upon returning, she placed it beside his rifle. Then on her knees she scraped up a soft pile of pine needles, spread his saddle blankets upon them, and folded his coat for a pillow.

"There's a bed for you. I reckon you won't get cold. If you do, use one of the blankets. An' now I'll go."

Jim gazed up at her as she knelt there. "Molly—kiss me," he importuned, quite beside himself. "I'll be here alone, unable to move—Slinger might come back and kill me—kiss me, Molly."

"You ask that of *me* — Molly Dunn?"

"I don't care who or what you are."

Twice he reached for her, but she was just a little too far away.

"You mustn't move," she said in alarm, edging close on her knees. Then he could reach her. How large and dark her eyes appeared in her pale face!

"Kiss me, and go."

She bent over his forehead.

"No!" he cried, seeing her intent, and moving impatiently.

Then she bent lower, closing her eyes, and laid cool sweet lips on his. Before Jim could catch his breath to speak again she had fled. For long after that Jim lay in a dream, the pleasure of which made him almost unconscious of pain. Then he fell into a fitful slumber.

When Jim awoke at last, not only had dawn come, but the sun had risen. His throbbing headache had departed, and aside from the painful itching and contracting of his wounds he seemed to be doing pretty well indeed. He sat up, finding that only the use of his left arm and shoulder hurt him severely.

About this hour, he reflected, there would be consternation in the Diamond camp. Curly and Bud would scatter those cowboys like a bunch of quail; and lonesome riders encountered in the woods were going to have to give strict account of their presence.

Thus engaged in thought, he was not prepared for low clatter of hoofs down the trail. The horse that made it was neither heavy nor shod. They swelled clearer for a little, slowed down, and then ceased.

"It's Molly," said Jim softly, and yet he endeavored to fortify himself against mistake. The moments dragged, until a rustle of brush and soft footfalls just behind the lean-to brought him up transfixed and thrilling.

Suddenly the slight form he had in his mind's eye appeared before him. She was bareheaded and the sunlight glinted from her disheveled hair. She carried a bundle. Her eyes appeared unnaturally large and black in her small pale face.

"Morning, Molly! I reckoned you'd never come," he said gladly.

"Are you—all right?"

"I had an awful night. And I was bad until just now," he replied.

She sat down and, depositing her bundle, put a hand to her bosom as if to still its heaving. She appeared worn and troubled, as if she had passed a harassed, sleepless night. She seemed such a wistful, pathetic little figure. Jim's heart filled with tenderness.

"Molly, did you get home safe?"

"Yes. Slinger didn't come, an' Ma never heahed me."

"That's fine. I'm sure glad. I've worried a lot."

"I bought this medicine, an' I've fetched some clean linen, a towel an' soap, an' somethin' for you to eat."

"You're just wonderful, Molly!"

She gave him a fleeting flash of eyes. "I'll fetch some water."

Presently she reappeared, as noiseless as a shadow, to set the dripping canteen down beside him, and knelt to undo a buckskin thong around the bundle.

"It's goin' to hurt right smart," she said practically.

"Molly, I could stand to be carved into mincemeat by you."

Whereupon she laid a cool hand on his forehead and temples, and then slipped it inside his open shirt to feel of the bandages. "Wal, you don't 'pear to have fever, but you shore look an' talk flighty," she said. "Will you hold still an' keep quiet? This's

goin' to hurt like sixty. I've done it more'n once for Arch."

"There. I cain't do no more for you," she said, after applying a stinging solution to the wounds and bandaging them thoroughly. "I reckon these bullet holes are healin' clean, but it'd be sense to have your men get you to Flag, pronto."

"Thanks, Molly. I'm very grateful to you," he rejoined, opening his eyes to smile up at her. "I'll go to Flag, of course, if it's necessary. But I'll come back. Molly, is it safe for you to stay with me awhile?"

"Safe? I reckon so, now I'm heah," she replied. "Ma won't miss me. But all the same I ought to *run!*"

"Run? From what?"

"From you, Mister Jim."

"Please leave off the Mister. We've known each other a long time, now. Why should you run from *me?*"

"I've been with you only twice an' you made a fool of me both times," she replied resentfully.

"I never did," he protested. If he could stir her, even to anger, he might overcome the aloofness he sensed in her this morning.

"You shore did. That night on the porch at Flag! An' yesterday—that was worse. Your persuadin' me!"

"Molly, consider. There was no excuse for me at the dance. But yesterday there was."

"Maybe for you. But not for me. I shore wonder what you think of me."

"Molly, if you'll look at me I'll tell you what I think of you," he said in the coolest, easiest tone he could muster.

The dark head whirled. Her spirited action, the fire of her eyes, the receding of hot color, implied a doubt of him. Yet there seemed something else in her expression, not conscious hope, but a pathos due to the dream she only half divined.

"Will you marry me?" he asked simply, but with deep emotion.

"Mister Jim!"

"Let's dispense with the Mister. Call me plain Jim, and say 'Yes'."

He got hold of her hand, to find it trembling. "Listen, child," he began, determined to convince her. "You remember our meeting. Well, I think I fell in love with you then. If not then, at the dance surely. And last night I made up my mind to ask you to marry me. I've been shot, I know, Molly. And I'm excited. But I am absolutely in possession of all my wits. I love you very dearly. And I want to make you my wife."

"Me? Molly Dunn?"

"Yes, you, Molly Dunn."

"Oh! I cain't believe it," she exclaimed, incredulous of the amazing truth. "But, Mister Jim—"

"Stop calling me that," interrupted Jim imperiously. "Call me Jim—do you hear? *Jim!*"

"Shore I heah you—Jim," she replied sweetly.

"It sounds very nice. Now, what do you say, Molly?"

"I'm shore upset. An' I'll be so—so proud all my life—an' happy that you love me an' want me— But, Jim, I cain't marry you."

"Molly! Do you love some one else?"

"No."

"Don't you—couldn't you care for me?" he implored.

She gave him an enigmatical little smile. "Jim, you *have* lost your haid," she went on. "I'm Molly Dunn of the Cibeque. They always called me that. My brother is Slinger Dunn. An' this last shootin' will make him an outlaw."

"It needn't, Molly. No one need ever know. I'll not tell. And I'll find a way to change Slinger."

"But that's only one reason," she protested.

"Jim, I reckon you've heahed talk aboot me," she went on. "An' you're shore the one man I'd tell everythin'. Don't you let any lies aboot me stick in your haid."

"I didn't, Molly," said Jim. Then he told her of Hack Jocelyn's vain boastings, of his innuendoes, and at last his open, vile claim.

"Slinger will kill him for that," she replied furiously.

"I'd have done it myself," declared Jim, "if the boys hadn't pulled me off him."

"Jim, he never had no claim on me," Molly said earnestly. "Some of the other boys have tried to make up to me. But I cross my heart, Jim, no boy ever got anythin' like you got from me."

"Darling!" cried Jim.

That and the stealing of Jim's arm round her waist, drawing her down, would have been Molly's undoing. But he heard a soft step. A shadow crossed the light above him.

Chapter Sixteen

White Lies and Some Truth

JIM had only a glimpse of Slinger Dunn looming over him, gun in hand. Then Molly, with a scream, threw herself upon Jim protectingly.

"So heah you are, you wood louse," grated Slinger.

"Arch, I found him—on the trail—bleedin' to death," cried Molly.

"When—an' what you doin' up heah?"

"I—I went ridin', Arch. Yesterday. I heahed a shot. Then you came by like mad. An' I found him."

"You was meetin' him heah."

"No. No. Honest I wasn't."

Jim needed only one look up at Slinger Dunn's face to understand Molly's terror. "Dunn, she's not a liar," he said. "She couldn't have known I was on the trail. I was trailing the man who cut the drift fence."

"Aw, she'd lie an' you'd swear to it." His piercing gaze rested curiously on Jim. "How'n hell do you happen to be alive?" He brought the gun up to align it with Jim's head. But quick as a flash Molly covered Jim.

"For God's sake, Slinger, don't kill him," she begged.

"I shore will. An' I jest aboot as lief bore you, too. Git up." He kicked Molly, and his boot came partly in contact with Jim's thigh.

Molly not only refused to move, but she got her arms around him and clung to him, shielding his vital parts with her quivering body. "Arch, you cain't shoot him—when he's down—crippled—defenseless," she burst out passionately. "It wouldn't be human. It wouldn't be like Slinger Dunn. If it's on my account, you're wrong—terribly wrong. He never meant—bad by me."

"Molly, I reckon he's *done* bad by you. An' you're not only lyin' for him, but givin' yourself away."

"You cold-hearted devil!" she exclaimed. "How could you have a decent thought? Kill me, too!"

"Ahuh. You little hussy! But bein' daid wouldn't hide your shame, Molly Dunn."

"Oh, Arch, there's no shame. There's been nothin' but thoughts an' feelin's that have changed me. I love him. Cain't you see it? I love him!"

"Wal, I ain't blind," replied Slinger, and reaching down he laid hold of Molly and tried to pull her off.

Suddenly Molly, fierce as a wildcat, flung herself upon Slinger, and fought him for the gun.

The girl's courage, following her declaration of love, roused the lion in Jim. With all his might he kicked Dunn's hand, knocking the gun out of it.

"Hold still! Somebody comin'!" whispered Dunn hoarsely, stiffening.

Molly slipped out of his grasp, down to the ground. Jim listened, but could hear nothing save the pounding of his heart. Dunn stood strung like a listening deer. Then the brush crashed.

"*Hands up!*" came in a cool, sharp voice that made Jim's blood leap.

Dunn's back was turned. Swiftly he elevated his arms high above his head. Jim moved to see that Curly Prentiss had appeared round the corner of the lean-to. He held a cocked gun.

"Come round heah, Bud," he called. And with more crashing in the brush

Bud Chalfack followed his extended rifle into view. Both cowboys stepped closer, eyes piercing and hard.

Jim slipped Dunn's gun out of sight —an act as impulsively swift as the thought that prompted it.

"Face around heah," ordered Curly, and as Dunn pivoted he showed no surprise, but an alert, cold suspicion.

"By Gawd!" shouted Bud. "Look, Curly! If there ain't the boss—an' Molly Dunn!"

Jim seized avidly upon his opportunity, though his wit and spirit far exceeded his physical strength. "Hello—boys!" he began huskily. "So you found me — at last. Put up your guns."

"What's wrong heah?" demanded Curly, and Jim's heart felt a rush of warm gladness at the significance of the cowboys' mien.

"Nothing wrong, Curly — now — you've found me," replied Jim cheerfully. "But put down your gun—and you, too, Bud. I'm nervous."

"Wal, you look it," growled Curly, complying with Jim's order. Bud likewise lowered his weapon. "I reckon you'd better talk fast."

"Curly," burst out Jim in relief, "yesterday I found a cut in the drift fence. And horse tracks on the trail. I followed them down here. Somebody shot me, knocked me galley-west off my horse. When I came to, Molly Dunn was bathing my face. She was on her way up to camp—to warn me that Jocelyn and the Cibeque outfit had planned to kidnap me —for ransom. She heard the shot and found me.

"Well, it turned out the bullet had cut up through my shoulder. We tied it up. I wasn't able to get on my horse. Molly wanted to ride up to camp and fetch you, but I thought it'd be best for her to go home. You fellows would probably trail me, and if you didn't she could ride up today. Well, Molly came today, and it seems that her brother trailed her. Found us here. And, well—the truth is, he thinks I'm a bad egg—and had evil intentions toward Molly. That upset me—and made Molly sore. And, I reckon —that's all."

"Slinger Dunn, you're shore a hell of a bright fellar," said Curly. "Let your hands down. An' mebbe you'd do well to make yourself scarce around heah. But before you go you put this in your pipe an' smoke it, you —— —— hard nut of a Cibeque gun-slinger!—My boss, Jim Traft, wouldn't never have evil intentions toward *no* gurl, much less so sweet an' luvly a little lady as your sister."

"Slinger, sumbody ought to beat the daylight out of you," added Bud. "Me an' Curly both made up to Molly. Was we good enough fer her? No, we was not. Mebbe Jim *was* good enough. But you can gamble both he an' Molly are above your lowdown suspicions. Now, you mozey along, and hereafter stay on your side of the fence."

Slinger eyed them while they delivered their separate speeches, and then looked strangely down upon Molly, and lastly at Jim. Then he strode out to disappear in the brush.

"You doggone old tenderfoot!" said Curly, sitting down beside Jim. "Gone an' got yourself shot fer the Diamond! I shore hope it ain't bad."

Bud crowded in beside Molly. "Boss, I wuz orful scared fust off. 'Course we didn't see who it wuz . . . Gosh! I never wuz so glad aboot nothin'."

"An' so little Molly found you!"

ejaculated Curly. "Lord, the luck uv some fellars!"

"Howdy, Molly!" drawled Bud. "So you saved our boss? Wal, I reckon now the Diamond will belong to you."

"Boys," interposed Jim, with a happy ring in his voice. "I know *a* diamond that will be Molly's, if she'll take it—along with the boss of the Diamond."

The cowboys were speechless. Molly was hopelessly stricken and confused.

"You boys take yourselves off in the woods for ten minutes," ordered Jim audaciously.

Curly got up awkwardly, after the manner of cowboys, and Bud followed suit.

"But say good-by to Molly," added Jim, relenting.

Curly had dignity and selflessness. "Miss Molly, you shore hev my thanks. Jim has won over the Diamond, an' if he's won you—wal, I don't wonder, an' I reckon him the luckiest fellar on the range. Good-by an' good luck."

They slumped away into the spruce, leaving a pleasant jingle of spurs.

"Oh, they're terrible—an' lovable, too," burst out Molly, lifting a flushed face.

"You bet they are. But that tickled me, Molly," declared Jim. "I've had a time with them. And of all the tables turned on them, this with you is the best! I think we turned the table on Slinger, too. Do you know you told him—*you loved me?*"

"What else could I do?" wailed Molly.

"But, heavens, tell me you didn't lie!"

She turned away her face. "No, Jim."

"You do love me?" he implored, drawing her close.

Suddenly she surprised him by flinging her arms around his neck and pressing lips and cheeks to his. "Oh —Jim! *Jim!*" Then she rose and ran into the spruce.

Jim lay back spent, elated, conscious of recurring pangs in his wounds, overcome by his feelings. Presently his reverie was disrupted by the advent of the cowboys with his horse and their own. Bud found his saddle, and then came into the lean-to for the blankets.

"Come on, you boss of the Diamond," he said, making no effort to help Jim up.

Jim slowly crawled to a post of the lean-to and using that as a support he labored to a standing position. Then he swung up into the saddle, to fierce shooting pains through his shoulder.

Chapter Seventeen

The Fight at West Fork

A WHOLE week had to pass before Molly Dunn came out of her trance. Good luck facilitated an otherwise insupportable situation. Her parents never learned she had been away from home nearly the whole of two days.

She felt Slinger's eyes upon her at times when she was not looking at him, but he never spoke to her.

A second Sunday came. Would she date all the rest of her life from that last day in the woods with Jim Traft? What would become of her? When Andy called she begged him to excuse her.

"Why, gurl, you're sick! You look turrible!" he said anxiously.

Then in the afternoon young Keech came on horseback. He was very mysterious, and Molly felt she would presently be rude, but he whispered to her that he had brought something for her which he had left outside by the fence. He gave no explanation and departed.

"Crazy fool!" muttered Molly, who had no patience these days. "Whatever is he up to?"

Nevertheless, curiosity consumed her, and she went out by the gate and searched in the bushes. There she stumbled upon a large package, neatly tied in paper, the like of which she had seen in the big Flagerstown store.

Molly watched her chance to carry the parcel in unobserved, and up to her attic. Then, with trembling hands and beating heart, she opened it. Inside were three smaller parcels, and some books, one old and several new. One parcel was a box of candy tied with ribbons. Another contained the most beautiful silk scarf Molly had ever seen. The third was a little sewing-kit, containing everything imaginable.

"Shore it's from Jim—bless his heart!" she murmured, and searched frantically for a note. There appeared to be none, and her wild hopes subsided. She examined the books and thrilled at their titles. The old book was a school grammar and had the look of long thumbing. Then on the fly-leaf she discovered handwriting: *James Traft. Wellsville High School. Sept. 1, 1878.*

Molly was thrilled, puzzled, and then suddenly dismayed. "It's a hint for me to study how to talk correct," she muttered resentfully. But anger could not abide with her. One single query drove it away. Why should Jim Traft want her to make up for her lack of education? There could be only one answer. He wished her to study. He believed in her. He meant—But Molly dared not follow up that thought.

Slinger still stayed at home, though now he went to the village; and Molly detected that he was drinking. No doubt he had expected a visit from the Flagerstown sheriff, or the cowboys of the Diamond. But they did not appear. And no word of Jim Traft having been shot by fence-cutters had yet reached West Fork. Molly believed now that it never would, and so she told her brother.

Other news and rumors were rife, however, some of which might be true. Work on the drift fence had not progressed beyond Tobe's Well. All the labor that the Diamond put in was in repairing sections that had been laid low. Small herds of stock had been reported on the trails, driven by riders whose names were not even whispered in West Fork. Money appeared plentiful in the village. There had been several shooting frays, of small consequence, one of which had been an attack on Andy Stoneham while walking the trail to Molly's home.

Another Sunday arrived, and with it, after Molly had waited long agonizing hours, young Keech with more of a mysterious air, more assurance that he shared a great secret.

"Thar's a pack fer you in the barn, hid in the corner," he informed her with a meaning grin. "I'll drop in on my way back, in case you want to send a letter."

"Letter!" faltered Molly. "How—how soon'll you be back?"

"Reckon aboot sundown. I'll whistle," he returned, and rode off down the lane.

Molly watched him guiltily. He seemed to take it for granted that she was a party to this courtship of Jim Traft's. The affair certainly could not be kept secret very long, even if young Keech justified the trust Jim had in him. Molly knew these youngsters. Soon everybody would learn that she was accepting gifts from the nephew of rich old Traft, and that would only be another black mark for Molly Dunn of the Cibeque.

She went into the barn and found the pack. Three times as large and heavy as the first one! Molly's fingers burned to open it, but she resolutely hid it and ran back to the house. She would return it. But no, she had not the strength to do that, let alone hurt Jim's feelings. She would write and tell him not to send any more.

Up by her loft window, Molly labored over that letter. She had to explain to Jim why he must not send more presents, why he must forget her. And then she seemed driven to add more, the content of which she scarcely realized and that she dared not read over.

Keech trotted down the lane, and received the letter as a matter of course. Molly watched him ride away into the gloom of the forest. And when he had gone she stood there, looking up at the grand bulk of the Diamond. Under cover of the thickening dusk she secured the pack and carried it to the cabin and up to her secluded abode. Carefully she sorted the parcels, little and big, searching for a letter. But again there was none. And Molly was glad. If she read written words of love and hope and demand from him she would be unstable as water.

More books, and these from St. Louis! To her amazement all the parcels were marked with the name of that distant Eastern city. He had sent for things. The Flagerstown stores were not good enough for her. How could she ever resist his way of making somebody of her? Then for the ensuing hour she marveled at and gloated over a multiplicity of pretty and useful little presents. Then she crawled into bed and cried herself to sleep.

On Saturday afternoon she went to the village with her mother, the first visit there for a month. It was the one day in the week when there was any activity at West Fork. Saddle horses and buckboards along the hitching-rails attested to visitors in town; all the available room along the plank sidewalk was taken up by wagons and buggies.

They came at length to Summers's store, where Mrs. Dunn and Molly had to await their turn. When Mrs. Dunn met the worst gossip in West Fork, to become avidly absorbed at once, Molly, as a matter of self-preservation as well as taste, strolled on through this store into the next which was connected with it.

Presently she found herself quite near the door, and curiously took a peep out. A young man had just ridden up to the porch. And when Molly recognized Jim Traft she nearly dropped to the floor. Then as the usual hum of talk of the loungers outside abruptly ceased, Molly realized that she was indeed not the only interested one.

Jim dismounted and threw his bridle, to walk up half the steps. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said cooly, and his resonant voice carried. "My name's Jim Traft and I'm looking for Slinger Dunn."

"Wal, Mister Traft, you'll find Slinger in Mace's saloon," drawled someone.

"Thanks," replied Traft, and flipping a silver dollar to an urchin there, he said, "Johnny, go in and tell Slinger Dunn that if he isn't afraid to come out Jim Traft would like to see him."

The boy snatched up the coin and bounded off the porch. Jim stepped up another step. He appeared composed, but pale. He had some deep motive in bearding Slinger Dunn right in his own den. Molly fell prey to a tumult of thrill and shudder. Traft's message had caused a low exclamation to run through the occupants of the porch, a dozen or more of whom Molly could see through the door and window.

"By gum! Slinger's a-comin'!" said someone.

Slinger came into view, crossed the porch to confront Traft. "Did you send thet kid in heah?" — Slinger jerked his left hand backward; his right hung significantly free and low —"askin' me out if I wasn't afeared?"

"Howdy, Slinger. Yes, I did," replied Jim, and he stepped up the last step. After a keen, fearless glance straight into Slinger's eyes, he extinguished the cigarette he carried and dropped it off the porch. It was noticeable that he wore gloves.

"Wal, you want to be careful aboot sendin' fer me thet way."

"No offense. I just wanted you outside."

"An' what fer, Mister Traft?"

"Several things, Slinger, and for that reason I'm glad some of your friends and townsfolk are present," replied Traft. A small group of men had followed Dunn out of the saloon, but did not come up on the porch.

"What you want?" demanded Dunn.

"First I want to tell you I'm sorry my outfit suspected you of cutting our drift fence. We found out who did it. So I'm apologizing for myself and the Diamond—to you, publicly."

"Wal, it wasn't necessary fer nobody to apologize to *me*," returned Dunn. "All the same, I hadn't nuthin' to do with cuttin' your drift fence."

"Well, that settles that. Now you settle *this*. There's talk going around about your sister and me. Some of it is credited to you. Did you tell Hack Jocelyn and Seth Haverly that you not only heard I had insulted Molly —mistreated her, but you *believed* it?"

"I reckon I did, Mister Traft."

"Thanks," said Traft, raising his voice. "Now listen. You are dead wrong. I fell in love with Molly—pretty pronto, I admit. And I asked her to marry me. *Twice!* Was that an insult? I shall ask her again. Will that be an insult?"

"I cain't see it thet way."

"I did—well, embrace her *before* I asked her. But I meant no insult. I was just excited—out of my head. Could that be held against me by any fair-minded person—knowing I followed it up with an offer of marriage?"

"No, it couldn't be," declared Dunn.

"Thanks again. Well, Molly refused me. And one of the reasons she gave me was that she was Slinger Dunn's sister."

Molly saw Arch flinch, and she felt a pang for him. This Jim Traft had a tongue as deadly as a bullet.

"Now, Slinger Dunn, listen," added Traft, his voice rising a bit. "You're going to hear something. If you were half the man you think you are you'd quit this lazy, drinking, gun-slinging life for your sister's sake. But you've not got sense enough to see what she's worth. And as for your talk about her, well, you are a dirty, low-down skunk. You're a yellow dog. Now, I'm not much on guns, but if you're not a coward—a *coward*—you'll lay off that gun-belt. And I'll swear, if I don't beat you as you deserve, I'll borrow a gun from somebody here, and fight you your own way."

Without the slightest hesitation Slinger unbuckled his belt containing the heavy gun, and handed it shakily over to someone. He sailed his sombrero off the porch, exposing a livid face. He made a gesture, eloquent of supreme fury. Then like a panther he leaped at Traft.

Molly saw Jim move as quickly, just as Slinger reached him, and appeared to strike at the same instant. The blow cracked. Its force, added to Slinger's momentum, sent him off the porch, where only a remarkable agility kept him on his feet. But he thumped solidly against the hitching-rail, which broke. Horses snorted and jumped. The crowd let out a whoop. People inside the store crowded out, and joining the men, cut off Molly's view.

She edged out, back to the wall, fearful, yet tremendously impelled. She had gloried in Jim's brave front, but she felt he would be helpless in a fight with Slinger. Bumping against a bench, Molly stepped up on it.

She saw Jim go down off the steps to meet Slinger. Then began a fierce exchange of blows, with Slinger slowly forced backward in front of Mace's saloon. Something was wrong, or unusual, Molly gathered from the exclamations and whispers of the villagers. Slinger Dunn had the reputation of being able to whip his weight in wildcats. But evidently he was slow in getting started here. Suddenly a blow upset him, and he plumped down ridiculously. The crowd, warming up to the fight, greeted that with yells.

Bounding up with the agility he was noted for, Slinger took a couple of hard blows in order to get hold of Traft. He clinched and plainly sought to trip his antagonist or wrestle him down. But Jim was the heavier and stronger, for with a whirl and a fling he sent Slinger sprawling. This occasioned a sudden silence. Was it possible for Slinger Dunn to be worsted?

"Stand up and fight—you Indian!" yelled Traft. And indeed Dunn had the look and suppleness of an Indian.

Dunn, now bloody and dirty, responded as if he had no control over himself, as if this taunting voice could drive him to anything. He crouched and bored in, fighting low, until Traft swung up under his guard. Dunn's head jerked up. Another blow sent it back, and a third square on the nose, making the blood fly, landed him on his back.

This time Slinger did not bounce up. Something was being battered into his consciousness—something that had already dawned upon the crowd. He slowly and cautiously rose, a stream of red running from his nose, down across his tight lips

and protruding chin. Again he changed his tactics.

He tried a square, stand-up give-and-take. It grew evident that had he adopted this style in the beginning he would at least have done better, for he hit Traft now and then. But the latter could take punishment. If it hurt he gave no sign. His method grew clear to the bystanders, and wagers were shouted out, backing him to win.

Slinger went down again. The blow that prostrated him was from Traft's right, and was a swing, coming at the end of a succession of short blows, delivered fast and closely, no doubt to beat his antagonist back and out of balance. Anyway, Molly saw her brother go piling into the dust.

"Reckon now Slinger will rooster him, an' it's shore aboot time," declared a young fellow in front of Molly.

Other remarks were not wanting. Evidently Slinger Dunn was not yet beaten. Molly had heard of the "rooster" trick in fighting, but had never seen it. But fear for Jim had fled from Molly. He could meet any of Slinger's backwoods tricks.

Slinger slowly circled Traft, keeping well away. Undoubtedly Traft was ready for a new attack. When he got rather close to the wall he divined that Dunn was trying to back him into such a position, whereupon he stood stock-still and waited. Suddenly Slinger dove down with incredible swiftness, on the back of his head and neck and elevated his feet even higher than his arms had been.

His boots were armed with long spurs. He began to kick at Jim. He actually appeared to stand on the back of his neck and his elbows.

"Rooster him, Slinger!" bawled a lusty-lunged lout. And the crowd of West Forkers roared.

Molly saw Jim back away from this amazing onslaught, and that was what he should not have done. For Slinger, hunching himself on his elbows, quick as a cat, forced Jim to the wall. He dodged one vicious kick. Another caught him on his extended arm, tearing his sleeve from wrist to shoulder. Molly saw a glimpse of red. Then a cruel spur cut open Jim's chin.

At this Molly screamed at her brother, but her voice was lost in the din. If Slinger did not kill Jim he would surely disfigure him for life. She leaped off the bench and darted here and there to get through the circle of men. Suddenly a louder yell, hoarse and thrilling, made Molly desperate. She squeezed into the front.

Jim, in bent position, had both arms around Slinger's legs. The terrible spurs stuck up, but they scarcely moved. Jim threw Slinger from him with such force that he turned clean over, his head and shoulders acting as a pivot. He fell with a flop. Jim made one jump and landed square on him with both heavy boots. This overbalanced Jim, who went down, but he went down kicking. Rolling over, he was up and at Slinger just as that blood-and-dirt begrimed individual tried to rise.

Jim fastened both hands in his neck and lifted him and flung him sheer against the wall, where his head rang like bone on wood. Slinger sank down limp and senseless.

The crowd grew silent. Molly had sense enough left to hide behind someone. Jim gazed down a long moment at his beaten antagonist, and

then with a scarf he wiped the blood and sweat and dirt from his face. He turned sidewise, so that Molly saw a pale tense cheek.

"See here—you fellows," panted Jim. "I came down—here—to lick him—and to offer him—a job. Reckon he's not worth it—but I'll go through with my part. Tell him—when he comes to—that if he can play square—there's a place on the Diamond for him." Then he parted the crowd and disappeared.

Molly slipped back up on the porch into the store, and never even thinking of her mother, she hurried through to the other corner store and went out the side entrance. Sobbing, and in a terrible condition of mind, she ran home.

Chapter Eighteen

Kidnaped

IT DID not help much for Molly to be home, safely hidden in her loft, except that presently she could breathe freely and would not be seen. But her mother's return warned her that she was liable to have a bad half hour, and she tried to fortify herself.

"Molly, you up there?" came a trenchant call.

"Yes, Ma."

"Come down pronto."

Her mother stood there, arms akimbo, gazing at her with an entirely new and astounding expression. "Why'd you run home?" she demanded.

"There was a fight—an'—an' it scared me."

"It needn't have—since it was in your honor. Molly Dunn, did you hear what that young Traft told the crowd?"

"Yes, Ma. I was there."

"And it's the truth? He *did* ask you to marry him?"

"Mother, it's the bitter truth," said Molly steadily.

"For heaven's sake, then, why didn't you accept him?"

"Because I'm Molly Dunn of the Cibeque."

Then indeed the storm broke over Molly, though it was so vastly different from what she had anticipated that instead of casting her down it began to do the opposite. After the first tirade against Molly's lack of family pride, she learned that she was a granddaughter of Rose Hillyard of Virginia, and had bluer blood than any Traft who ever lived.

"Didn't I always try to keep these West Fork louts away from you?" demanded Mrs. Dunn in protest at the outrageous way she had been foiled. "Didn't I bring you up different? You always were somebody, Molly Dunn. Now it's proved. You're courted by a fine young chap. He's got stuff in him. He's nephew to old Jim Traft, they tell me, who owns ranches all over, and eighty thousand head of stock. You can't refuse to marry him. Why, it'll be our salvation!"

Molly had to listen and she dared not voice her protest. Temporary relief, however, came with an interruption in shape of the arrival of several young men bringing Slinger home.

For once her mother's tongue stopped its wagging. Arch Dunn was a spectacle to behold. He could walk,

but that was about all, and he rewarded the kindly offices of those who had escorted him by driving them off.

"Arch—can I do anythin'?" faltered Molly.

"Wal, I reckon so, since I cain't do for myself," was the surprising answer.

Molly hastened to get a pan of water, soap and bandages and salves, and hurried to his side. She divined that by this incident she would either gain or lose a brother. She unbuckled the long spurs, shuddering at the bloodstains on one of them. Arch had got what he deserved. The imprint of hobnails on his face appeared to be a brand. He had been treated to a dose of his own medicine. But the fatal issue might be now that he would kill Jim Traft. Molly prayed and hoped. Could not the same thing, almost, that had happened to her, happen to Arch? She pulled off his boots, and then his wet and torn shirt.

It was not pleasant to look into her brother's visage. Yet pity and tenderness came to her aid.

"Much obliged, Molly," he said, when she had finished what little she could do. "Was you in town when the cyclone hit?"

"Yes, Arch. I—I saw it," she replied, thrilled that he would talk to her in such wise.

"Did you see him lick me?"

She murmured an affirmative. "But, Arch, you must have—have hurt him very much, too," said Molly. "He was all bloody."

"Shore. I reckon so. I'd have cut him to pieces—I was thet mad. Molly, I got too mad. An' at thet he hurt me wuss with his sharp tongue."

"It'd not have been so—so bad if you hadn't tried to 'rooster' him."

"Wal, all's fair in thet kind of a fight. I don't care aboot thet any more'n I care aboot his lickin' me. He's simply a better man. I told him so. But I reckon there's another way."

"Arch, you—you'll meet Jim—force him to draw?"

"Thet'd be natural-like, wouldn't it?"

"From the stand of the Cibeque, yes. But there's a bigger way to meet it. If you forced him to draw, you'd kill him!"

"Huh! I'm not so damn shore of thet. Mister Jim Traft is a surprisin' hombre."

"Arch, I shan't beg you again," went on Molly eloquently, "but I'll *pray*."

"Wal, I'll let him off—providin' you agree to marry him."

"*Arch!*" whispered Molly.

"Only deal you can make with me, an' you bet it's a hard one to swaller."

Molly knew Slinger Dunn and that she must grasp at straws. "I—I'll—take you up, Arch," she said in a strangled voice. "If he—asks me—any more."

"Don't worry none, sister. Thet hombre will be heah today. An' you can make him ask you again. Reckon, though, he'll wait till dark—not wantin' you to see his mug. I shore bunged him up."

Molly trembled on the brink of the precipice to which she had been driven. She dared not look over. She must leap with closed eyes. "Did you—rooster him bad?" she asked.

"Nope. Only scratched him. But I was shore leggin' it fer him when he ducked an' grabbed me. Fetch me a drink. I'm shore parchin'."

Molly felt that she would die for Jim and it was not so very much worse

to have to marry him. The prospect dazzled and terrified her. If Jim would live in a log cabin and let her work for him! That would be heaven. But he would want to take her away from the Cibeque—to live in the mansion of a ranch house at Flagerstown, and meet his rich old uncle—his other relatives—and his mother.

Molly was overcome at the thought. She could not do it. But to save his life she would do anything.

In the dusk she wandered along outside the lane, irresistibly drawn. Her mother and brother were fools. Jim would not come. She longed for him, yet prayed he would stay away.

Then a whistle electrified Molly. Her moccasined feet pattered on the hard-packed ground.

She saw a dark form at the gate, leaning on the bars. She ran on. Yes —Jim! Then somehow she was sitting on the top bar—one hand at her bursting breast and the other in Jim's grasp. He spoke, but she did not distinguish what he said, and she could not reply. She felt his rough strong hands. He was slipping something on her finger. A ring!

Then from the gloom behind rasped a low hard voice: "*Hands up Traft!*"

Dark forms appeared out of the brush, almost without rustle. One man shoved a gun against Jim's back. Seth Haverly! Up went Jim's hands. Molly recognized Sam Haverly. The third man came close—laid a powerful hand on her.

"If you yap we'll kill him!"

Molly would have fallen but for his hold. It was Hackamore Jocelyn.

"Turn round, Traft, an' march," ordered Seth Haverly.

"What's this? A holdup?" queried Jim hoarsely.

"Keep still—or it'll be wuss!" hissed Haverly.

"Fellars, I'm takin' the gurl along," announced Jocelyn.

Haverly made a fierce gesture, which included his gun. "You air like hell! I'm tellin' you again, Jocelyn, thet I'm runnin' this outfit. Stay heah an' keep her quiet till we git away with the hosses. Then foller after us."

"But, Seth, I want the gurl," replied Jocelyn, low and doggedly. "I'll divvy my share of Traft's ransom with you."

"Damn you, Jocelyn!" cursed Haverly. "We'll get hell enough without that. Do you want Slinger Dunn on your trail? Stay heah an' hug the gurl who hasn't no use fer you, if you're that much of a sucker. But foller us pronto."

The Haverlys then forced Jim ahead of them, vanishing in the gloom of the lane. Hack Jocelyn loomed over her.

"Molly, I'm takin' you willin' or by force," he whispered, bending down to peer at her. "An don't fergit—if you make even a peep they'll shoot Traft."

"Where they goin'?" gasped Molly.

"Up back on the Diamond. Thet wasn't my idee. They don't know Curly Prentiss. They're goin' to hide Traft an' hold him fer ransom. But when they git the money they'll kill him. Hang him on the drift fence!—Thet's the plan. An' the only chance of savin' his life is fer you to go with me."

"How'll that—save Jim?"

"I'll do it. I'll stick out fer lettin' him go. An' if it comes to a pinch I'll force them."

"You swear to Gawd!" demanded Molly in fierce passion.

"Shore. I swear to Gawd."

"Slinger will kill you. I'm warnin' you, Hack Jocelyn."

"I heah you," he replied grimly. "But I'll hev my stake an' we'll ride out of the country. You an' me, Molly Dunn. Now, will I hev to hawg-tie you?"

"I'll go. But keep your hands off me!"

He led her down the darkening lane, out of the clearing into the forest.

Chapter Nineteen

At the Hideout

When Jim Traft heard that rasping command to throw up his hands, and he felt the hard prod of a gun against his back, he came down to earth with a sickening thud.

Behind Molly he saw a dark form rise and loom. He recognized it. Hack Jocelyn! With a muttered curse at his heedless disregard of Andy Stoneham's warning he lifted his hands above his head. Then another dark form clinked into sight. He was ordered to face around. A swift glance was the last he had of Molly. Jocelyn's looming over her further added to his dismay.

At the point where the lane entered the road to town three other men waited with horses. Jim was amazed to make out his own horse, saddled and bridled.

"What's your game, Haverly?" queried Jim, breaking into a whispered colloquy.

"We're holdin' you fer ransom," came the gruff reply. "We'll take you to a hidin'-place an' send a rider in to Flag."

"Well, I'll recommend my uncle's paying it, provided you agree to two things."

"An' what's them?"

"That the ransom isn't made out of all reason—and that Hack Jocelyn doesn't share in it."

"Sam — you heah thet?" sharply ejaculated Haverly.

"Jocelyn is using you Cibeque fellows to his own end and you can bet on it," concluded Jim, thinking this entering wedge enough for the moment.

"Seth, I'm gettin' leary myself," replied Sam Haverly. "An' I'm sorry I plugged Jocelyn's game. When he killed Andy Stoneham tonight, right in the road, I shore throwed a fit. Nobody but Boyd an Hart an' me seen it done. But you can gamble West Fork will lay thet on to us."

"Killed Andy Stoneham!" ejaculated Seth, leaning forward. "Wal, I'll be damned! What on earth fer?"

"Jocelyn swore Stoneham was spyin' on him an' giving us away to Molly Dunn."

"Ahuh. Jealous of poor Andy! Thet fellar is crazy aboot Molly Dunn. We better not wait fer him."

Jim was told to climb into his saddle. They started off at a trot and soon turned off the road into a trail. Throughout that long night his captors were silent, keeping to a trot on level ground and a walk over rough places and upgrades. In the gray of dawn they rode up at last into open grassy parks where no hoof tracks would show, down again and up once more, to descend a pine- and spruce-timbered slope, to enter at daylight a beautiful white-grassed park, fringed by forest.

Jim saw a shaggy gray log cabin at the very edge of the pines. Smoke issued from its rude outside stone chimney. A man appeared, rifle in hand. Haverly let out a shrill whistle. Another man appeared, and he shouted a hoarse welcome.

"Wal, we're heah," announced Seth Haverly to Jim, as they came to a halt at the cabin. "I cain't say that you squealed a hell of a lot on the way. I reckon Jocelyn had you figgered wrong when he said you was a dude tenderfoot, or else he lied like a streak." Seth was a thin, wiry, blond young man with clear, hazel eyes and a beard like fine, amber moss.

Jim laughed. "Am I to get down?"

"Shore. Pile off."

"Was Jocelyn in West Fork yesterday when I had a little set-to with Dunn?"

"Nope. But I was an' I seen your little set-to. Might I ask, Mister Traft, what you'd call a *big* set-to?"

"Well, there'll be a pretty fair one when Curly Prentiss and the Diamond hole you fellows here," responded Jim cheerfully. "And a real one when Slinger Dunn meets Hack Jocelyn. I wouldn't be in Jocelyn's boots for a million."

Meanwhile the horses were unsaddled, hobbled, and turned loose. And Jim had a chance to look over the men. Sam Haverly was also blond, almost red of hair and complexion, more sturdy than his brother, less lean of face and intelligent of eye. Hart Merriwell could not have been picked out of a group of cowboys for any distinct individuality. Boyd Flick was dark and small and he hobbled around in enormous chaps. Jim had yet to hear the names of the two members of Haverly's outfit that had been keeping camp here in the park.

"Whar's our new boss?" one of them inquired, after greeting Seth, and his tone did not lack sarcasm.

"Matty, you can cut thet talk," replied Haverly, "or I'm gonna get sore. Jocelyn stayed behind." And in succinct words he gave his questioner a few details of what had detained him.

"If you're hungry come an' git it before I throw it out," called the other fellow from the cabin.

"Make yourself to home," said Haverly to Jim, leading him in. Then: "Wal, Traft, do I hawg-tie you or not?"

"I'm sure I can't read your mind. As a matter of fact, Haverly, I don't think you've got much gray matter, or you'd never have let Jocelyn persuade you into this deal."

Haverly took that retort gravely. "Wal, Mister Jim, you peer to be a straight-talkin' fellar. You can set around heah in comfort. But if you run we'll wing you. Thet's my order. Do you savvy?"

"Sure. And much obliged. Molly was right when she said you were a pretty decent fellow—it was only bad company that was making an outlaw of you."

"Wal, so Molly said thet!" Seth ejaculated, with a queer look on his face.

He turned to Matty, who evidently was an important member of the outfit. "Traft says he'll advise his uncle to pay a ransom, providin' it's not out of all reason, an' thet Jocelyn don't git no share."

"'Strikes me hard," said Matty.

Jim had a wild idea. "Haverly, would you trust *me* to get the ransom for you?"

That rendered the eager group speechless. Before Haverly regained his voice the cook, who had gone outside to empty a pan, whistled low and sharp. Seth strode out, followed by the others.

"Jocelyn comin' down out of the woods—ridin' double," said the cook, pointing.

Jocelyn had a gray, corded face—eyes like gimlets. He threw the bridle and, hands on hips, regarded the silent group. "Missed the trail an' was lost till daylight," he explained.

Seth Haverly took a step out in front of his comrades. "So, Jocelyn, you kidnaped Molly?" he queried harshly

"Nope. She come willin'. Ask her yourself"

"Molly, is he tellin' me straight? Did you come up heah of your own accord?" demanded Haverly.

"Yes, I did, Seth," replied Molly calmly.

Molly's face was wan. The big dark eyes gazed straight down into Jim's. He read in them love, hope, meaning. They told him all he wanted to know.

"Did you come with Jocelyn willingly?"

"Reckon so, Jim. But I didn't have a lot of choice," drawled Molly, and from behind Jocelyn's shoulder she gave him a deep, warning look.

Jocelyn laughed sardonically. "My word goes a hell of a long way in this heah outfit!"

"You fetched her ag'in my order," declared Seth Haverly, and turning to Molly: "Get down, gurl. You shore look fagged. Fletch will fix you somethin' to eat. An' I'll make a bed for you."

Molly slid down, and limped to a seat under the cabin's extending roof. Jim's gaze followed her devouringly. Happening then to shift it to Jocelyn, he was struck by that worthy's deep-set eyes, smoldering fire.

Seth returned, carrying a huge bundle of spruce boughs, which he carried into the back of the cabin, where a stall-like partition hid a corner. Evidently behind this he made a bed, for he came out to get a blanket. After which task he reappeared, to approach Molly. "You can sleep back there an' be out of the way," he said.

Molly disappeared behind the partition. Finally Jocelyn dismounted, and uncinching the wet horse he threw saddle and blankets, unbuckled the bridle, and let him go.

"What's on your mind, Seth?" he queried.

"Shore there's plenty, Jocelyn, an' you're part of it," replied Haverly gruffly.

"Ahuh. Mister Traft's been talkin' to you. The man who gets your ear last has you on his side. Come away from these crawfish of yours, an' we'll settle this deal pronto."

"Nope. Sam an' the rest of my outfit air goin' to heah every word I say."

Jocelyn rolled and lighted a cigarette.

Seth Haverly, after a pause, went on speaking: "I'm sore aboot your shootin' Andy Stoneham."

"Thet's none of your bizness," snapped Jocelyn.

"But it is. You're in my outfit now. We'll all be held part responsible for thet. I reckon it don't make a lot of difference—if we get away with this ransom deal. But your stealin' Molly Dunn from her home—thet'll let us out."

"Haverly, I didn't steal her. You've got ears, man. You heerd her say she came willin'. She's goin' away with me to marry me."

"You're playin' a prutty high hand, Jocelyn. Your murderin' Stoneham an' runnin' off with Molly—thet puts a bad complexion on the whole deal. I've a mind to back out of it."

"You will like hell!" asserted Jocelyn. "You'll go through on this deal or you'll have me to square up with."

The scarcely veiled threat had its solid effect upon Haverly. "Wal, we ain't got a lot of time to palaver," he said. "Curly Prentiss is on Traft's trail, you can bet. The West Forkers air goin' to give him a hunch. An' wurst, Slinger Dunn has got to be considered. Shore as thunder Slinger Dunn is on your trail right this minnit. He knows every hole in these hills, an' he's shore a hound on a scent."

Suddenly Jocelyn took hold of Haverly and dragged him out of earshot of the listeners. There in plain sight under a pine they argued, with Haverly growing less and less protesting. Finally they reached some kind of an agreement and returned to the cabin.

"Sam, we've made the best of a bad bargain," announced Seth. "The hitch was Molly. I jest don't care to be around if Slinger happens along. Wal, Jocelyn has agreed to take the gurl an' go to the haid of the draw up heah, and stay hid in thet trapper's cabin at Turkey Spring. A rifleshot will warn him to rustle. As fer the deal—we'll send Boyd to Flag pronto with the letter to old Traft. Boyd's got the fastest hoss, an' allowin' half a day to get the money he can make it in less'n two days. What you say?"

"Suits me," said Sam.

"Wal, it ain't so slick," added Matty. "Tomorrer is Sunday an' no bank is open. Suppose Boyd don't find old Traft at home?"

Jocelyn waved this aside as if unworthy of consideration. "It's the letter thet'll fetch results. Blodgett or any of Traft's friends will dig up ten thousand."

"Oh, will they?" queried Matty dubiously. "I'll write the letter. It'll be short an' sweet. It'll say if thet money ain't heah with Boyd in twenty-four hours we'll kill Jim Traft an' hang his body over his drift fence!"

Chapter Twenty

Shadow in the Pines

JOCELYN opened a saddlebag, to take out a small packet, which he laid on the ground. "You're a bright fellar, Seth," he said, "but you ain't as bright as I am. My idee is to make Traft write this letter to his uncle."

"Shucks! I thought of thet long ago. An' fer thet matter, he offered to do it. But he made the offer providin' I didn't ask fer too much ransom, an' thet you wasn't to hev no share."

"Oh! The hell you say!" returned Jocelyn with a dark glance at Jim. Then he opened the packet and laid writing-paper, pen, and ink on the woodpile. "Fetch a box."

One of the party procured a box from inside. "Now, Mister Jim Traft, I reckon you'll put one of your accomplishments to good use," declared Jocelyn.

"Wait," said Haverly. "Jocelyn, I'll agree aboot sendin' fer the money. But I'm daid set ag'in your double-crossin' old Traft. I weaken on two points of your deal."

"An' what's them?"

"Layin' the blame on Slinger Dunn —"

"Too late. I've already fixed thet in West Fork. Never mind your other point."

Jim had heard enough to divine Jocelyn's diabolical plot. Whether that ransom was paid or not, he realized Jocelyn meant to decorate the drift fence with his dead body, like a scarecrow hung up in a cornfield.

"You already fixed the blame—on Slinger!" ejaculated Haverly.

"Shore did. An' nobody but you fellars can prove *he* didn't shoot thet store clerk. I've no time to tell you how I put the job up on Dunn. But it's *done*. If he has started on our trail, he'll never be able to clear himself. Thet's all."

"Somebody tie up this fellar," ordered Jocelyn. "Reckon he'd like to get back there with my lady love."

It was just possible for Jim to resist leaping at Jocelyn, who he knew would shoot him upon the slightest excuse.

"Turn round an' lean ag'in the post," Hack commanded. "An' put your hands behind you." With that he proceeded to bind Jim's hands and feet. Then he kicked Jim's feet from under him, letting him down. It so happened that Jim slid round in falling, and there he sat, back to the post, and devoured by wrath.

Whereupon Jocelyn drew his bottle from his hip pocket and took a drink. "To celebrate the day, Mister Traft," he said. "An' when I drink the rest of this I'll set the bottle on your head an' treat you to some real shootin'."

Repairing to the box, he sat down again before the writing-materials. When he had finished the letter he read it over with evident satisfaction.

Seth Haverly held out a lean hand. "I'm askin' to see what you writ."

Imperturbably Jocelyn sealed the letter. "Reckon you couldn't read it, if I let you," said Jocelyn.

"You're demandin' more'n we agreed on," shouted Haverly, beside himself with rage.

"I shore am. Ten thousand wouldn't begin to do me. You're a fool, Haverly. Old Traft will *pay* to save his nevvy's precious life."

"Yes, an' he'll pay all in vain," snarled Haverly, white to the lips.

Jocelyn gave little heed to him, and turning to Flick he presented the letter. "Get this in Traft's hands today, or Blodgett's. An' if they ain't handy go to Tobin, at the bank. Anyone of them will pile out the greenbacks. An' you ride back pronto."

"I ain't stuck on the job," declared Flick brusquely, rising to his feet. "I'll go an' do my damndest, but I'm tellin' you straight: Jocelyn has busted the Cibeque!"

Jocelyn stood up, to tilt his bottle and drain the contents. Stalking over to Jim, he pulled him up to an erect sitting posture, rapped his head against the post, and set the bottle upon it.

"There!" he exclaimed with elation. Drawing his gun, he stepped off ten long paces and turned.

Jim saw that the hammer of the Colt was up. Next instant he looked into the small, black, tube-like barrel of the quivering weapon. And the deadly little hole suddenly belched

fire. Particles of shattered glass fell on his head and shoulders.

When Jocelyn leveled the gun again Jim's consciousness seemed unclamped. Jocelyn was aiming a little lower this time. Back of the gun gleamed the eyes of a cat playing with a mouse.

Then came a rush and patter of moccasined feet. Molly flashed out. She struck up the gun so violently that it went off harmlessly in the air.

"Hack Jocelyn, put away that gun!" commanded Molly furiously.

Seth stepped out unsteadily. "Molly, you better stay back. Honest, gurl, Hack was only foolin'. He ain't really goin' to hurt Traft."

"You're a liar, Seth," snapped Molly. "You know better. An' you're a lot more than a liar. Flick was right, only the Cibeque *is* busted. You let Jocelyn drive Slinger out an' now you're—"

"Shet up," ordered Jocelyn, sheathing his gun. "Shet your mouth, or I'll slap it good an' hard."

"You *dare* touch me!" she blazed, with such passion that it affected even Jocelyn.

"Wal, I'll touch you aplenty an' pronto," replied Jocelyn.

Suddenly he espied the ring on Molly's left hand. "Where'd you get thet ring?" he demanded.

"None of your mix, Hack Jocelyn," retorted Molly, and she put her hands behind her back, It was then that Jim imagined he saw her look over Jocelyn or behind him.

Jim peered across the grassy open to the wooded slope. On that side the pines were scattered, and on the instant Jim sighted the flash of a dark form vanishing behind a tree trunk.

"You two-faced hussy!" ejaculated Jocelyn, dark with jealous wrath. "Stick out your hand—lemme see."

Molly coolly brought her hand round and extended it. "It's my engagement ring."

"Engagement!" echoed Jocelyn. "Molly, who gave you thet ring?"

"Mister James Traft," replied Molly, blushing deeply.

Jocelyn bellowed like a bull. "Since when? How long you bin engaged to this damn tenderfoot?"

"I reckon—since the night of the rodeo dance in Flag."

Perhaps nothing else could have shaken Jocelyn as this mortal blow to his vanity.

As Jocelyn whipped up his gun Molly stepped in front of him, to shield Jim. Slowly Jocelyn backed her toward where Jim sat, his head against the post, still holding the broken whisky bottle.

"Oh, Seth Haverly, but you're a rotten coward!" cried Molly. "You leave it for a girl to face this devil."

"But, Molly, devil or not, I'm in a deal with him," expostulated Seth, as if stung.

"Deal, yes—a dirtier deal than you know. He's—"

Jocelyn made a fierce reach for her. But he did not quite lose himself in the passion of the moment. He had to stand clear, to be free, to watch the Haverlys. So he dared not close in with her. "I'm warnin' you once more."

Molly kept her burning eyes on him while she denounced him to the Cibeque. "Seth, *he* cut the drift fence, even while he was workin' on the Diamond. An' after. He aimed to get you an' Slinger blamed for that. He's double-crossed you as he did Jim. He means to take *all* the ransom money

—to murder Jim an' lay that on you. He got me up heah—by swearin' he'd save Jim's life if—if I'd give in to him. I agreed. An' then he kept at me—all night long—an' once I had to fight him. But I—I wouldn't give in—"

Suddenly the gun banged. Jim felt the bottle blown off his head. Molly screamed. Haverly and his men dodged behind the cabin.

"Right under your arm, Molly," said Jocelyn. "How's thet fer shootin'?" And he began to step from one side to the other, the gun extended about even with his hip.

Molly did not back away from his formidable advance. She blocked his every move, interposing her body between the gun and Jim. Then like a cat she pounced upon Jocelyn's hand, shoving it out of line. *Bang!* The bullet scattered dust and gravel over Jim. Both her hands and then her teeth were locked on Jocelyn's wrist.

"Leggo!" he yelled lustily, wrestling to get free. With left hand he lifted Molly by her hair. He swung her clear of the ground, her weight nothing to his powerful arms. But he could not shake her grip.

"Bite, ——!" he cursed. And lifting her, he tried to get the gun on Jim. But as he pulled the trigger she swung desperately, spoiling his aim. The gun roared, and a bullet tore splinters out of the post beside Jim's ear, and whirred away into the forest. The shock of the explosion, right at her ear appeared to weaken Molly, for she let go with her teeth, and her weight sagged on Jocelyn's arm.

He shifted his left hand from her hair to her neck, where his long fingers shut like a vise. Yet on the instant he could not get loose. His malignant cry, however, hoarse and exultant, attested to the victory he saw.

Jim's distended sight caught a shadow of something passing him. "*Hey, cowpuncher!*" rang out the voice of Slinger Dunn.

Jocelyn jerked up his head and consternation showed on his convulsed face. He let go of Molly's neck, and she slid down.

Like a whipcord Jocelyn's gun leaped. But as it leaped Dunn's crashed. Shot through the heart, Jocelyn staggered forward, with an awful look that set blankly, and plunged step by halting step, to fall by the cabin door.

Chapter Twenty-One

Duel in the Cabin

A HEAVY breath escaped Slinger Dunn as he removed his gaze from the twitching Jocelyn to Molly and then to the bound Traft. "'Pears like I didn't get heah none too soon," he drawled.

"Slinger! Just—in time!" gasped Jim.

Molly sat up dazedly, her hair disordered, blood on her chin and nerveless hands. "Oh—Oh!—Oh!" she moaned.

"Air you hurted, Molly?" asked Dunn.

She stared wildly. "*Arch!*" she cried in recognition. "Is—he daid?"

"Wal, I reckon, onless he wears a big watch in his breast pooket."

Molly got shakily to her feet and ran unevenly to Jim, where she fell, still game, still proof against the collapse that had taken her strength.

"Cut — this — rope," she whispered huskily, plucking at Jim's bonds.

Dunn, with a wary glance at the back of the cabin, dropped a knife in front of Molly.

"Jim—did he hit you?" she asked fearfully as she freed his hands.

"No. But I sure know what a bullet sounds like. Let me have the knife —Molly!"

Jim severed the knotted rope and got up, lifting Molly with him, which action assured her that he was uninjured.

"Oh—thank heaven!" she cried, sinking against him. "Jim! Jim! I thought —he'd hit you."

Jim held her tight, and probably no other moment of his life could ever equal that one. Following it he became aware of Dunn sheathing his gun. Then Slinger addressed his sister:

"Molly, you was shore fightin' thet skunk, an' I needn't ask if he got the best of you. But Seth, heah, an' Sam —did they stand around an' let thet hombre bulldog you?"

"They shore did," she cried, lifting her pale face from Jim's arm. "An' what is wuss, Arch, they *believed* him —believed I'd got thick with him an' come up heah, a willin' hussy. Arch, I was 'most crazy. I prayed—an' I peeped out through a chink between the logs. An' I saw you comin' under the pine! *Oh!* then I had to brace an' keep Jocelyn off his guard—till you—could get heah."

"Wal, I reckon it's aboot good fer Jim Traft thet you *air* Slinger Dunn's sister," drawled Dunn.

"Good and fine and wonderful," declared Jim fervently. "I'm thanking God she *is* Molly Dunn of the Cibeque!"

"Thet squares you with me, Jim Traft," replied Slinger gruffly. "Take her away from the cabin—an' wash the blood offen her."

Jim was not loath to lead Molly away, half supporting her in his arm. He lifted her across the brook and led her on across the open grassy flat and up the first gentle slope to a pine tree, where a fragrant brown mat, and shade, invited a stop.

"This is far enough," he said, letting her down. "I'll run back—"

"Don't leave me. There'll be a fight," she cried, clinging to him.

"But only to the brook to wet my scarf—you're all bloody."

"Then hurry."

Jim made short work of the trip down to the brook, and while soaking his silken scarf he heard a loud angry protest from Haverly in the cabin, and the cold ring of Slinger's voice. He ran back to Molly. "How wonderful you were—how I love you!" And he kissed her passionately—stained lips and chin and hands.

"Oh—Jim—somebody'll see," she whispered.

"Who cares?—But let me scrub you good," laughed Jim, and he washed her chin, and likewise the little strong, brown hands.

"There goes one. Slinger's let him off. Look!" said Molly.

"That's Matty," replied Jim, recognizing the tall member of Seth's outfit. He was in a hurry, and snatching up a saddle and bridle he strode off up the park, looking back over his shoulder. "He didn't seem a bad sort of fellow."

"I'm glad. Slinger is hell when he's —like you saw him. Oh, but wasn't Hack Jocelyn the dastardliest—"

"Sweetheart, don't think of him," entreated Jim.

"But he's daid! An' Slinger killed him—all on my account."

"No, not at all. Some on mine, and some on his own—Honey, did you really mean you'd accepted me—when you threw it up to Jocelyn—that we were engaged?"

"Yes, Jim—but you cain't make love to me now! I tell you Slinger will *kill* Seth Haverly, an' like as not Sam, too."

"I'm afraid, but I hope not," declared Jim. "All the same, Molly Dunn, while they're palavering I *can* make love to you."

"I guess not," she declared. "Oh—Jim—" She was surrendering to his arm, when suddenly she started up. "Look! Another leavin'."

"That's the cook. Fletch, they called him," said Jim, watching the man, who lost no time in imitating Matty's example in making tracks from the cabin, burdened by his saddle.

"Hart Merriwell left, besides Seth an' Sam. Slinger will let Hart go. Now you watch."

Presently Jim espied Merriwell come out, in no great hurry, and instead of striding away he slipped round to the back of the cabin and peered through a chink.

"Well, there must be something up," declared Jim anxiously.

"Listen! That's Slinger shoutin'," rejoined Molly.

Jim did distinguish Slinger's voice, with its high ringing note. As Slinger kept on it was no great task to imagine the storm of violent backwoods profanity with which he was berating the brothers who had betrayed him.

"Just like I heahed once at a dance," said Molly with a sigh. "There!" She jerked spasmodically at the crack of a gun, and clapping her hands over her ears she sagged against Jim.

"Gosh!—That didn't sound like Slinger's gun!" ejaculated Jim, and all his being seemed suspended upon his hearing. *Bang!* "That *was* Slinger's," he went on huskily, tightening an arm round Molly.

Shots followed, three or four, so swiftly as to be hardly separated. Then again came the heavy boom and a volley of lighter reports. There was a pause that might have been a suspension of hostilities. Jim dared believe it was over. Then followed loud reports, a heavy one—more of the sharp rifleshots—another heavy, and quickly the boom.

Silence! Smoke drifted out of the cabin, showing blue against the green pines. Hart Merriwell, who had evidently run off, appeared, coming slowly back, halting, waiting, then approaching again. But there were no more shots.

Jim said huskily, "I see Merriwell coming back. There—he's going in. Molly, I'll go, too. I'll come back—if—if—" He squeezed her hand, and getting up, he ran down the slope, leaped the brook, and soon reached the cabin.

The interior was still smoky. Jim saw one of the men huddled in a heap. Then on the other side he espied Merriwell kneeling beside Slinger, whom he had propped up.

"Is he—alive yet?" called Jim breathlessly, and he ran in.

"Hullo! Shore, Slinger's alive, but all shot up," replied Merriwell. "Help me carry him out of this smoke."

They lifted the bleeding, broken body and carried it out to the shady side, where they laid it on a blanket. While Jim lifted Slinger's head Merriwell placed a saddle under it.

"Reckon you'll—cash in, Slinger, ole pard," he said, gulping. "Anythin' I can do?"

"Where's Molly?" asked Dunn faintly.

"She's across the brook. I'll call her," replied Jim, and he got up to go round the cabin. Molly was coming. She had seen them carry her brother out. Jim went out to meet her.

"Molly, he's alive. He asked for you." He had to run to keep up with her.

"Oh, Arch!" burst out Molly, dropping on her knees. "Are you—bad hurt?"

"Wal, Molly, I ain't hurt atall—but I reckon—I'm done fer," he said feebly.

"Oh, cain't we do anythin'?" cried Molly.

"You don't happen—to have some—whisky?" replied Slinger.

"There's some here," said Jim, leaping up. "Where did I see it? Jocelyn had it." Jim ran to the saddlebags, and procuring a flask he rushed back. Dunn took a stiff drink.

"Wal, Jim Traft, you're lucky—thet you're not layin' around heah full of bullet holes," he said in stronger voice. "I was fer killin' you myself—till Molly made me—a promise."

"What promise?"

"Molly, air you goin' to keep it?"

"Yes, Arch," replied Molly, as she bent over him, her bright tears falling.

"Good! Reckon thet'll be aboot all," said Slinger with satisfaction.

"Molly, tell me the promise," rejoined Jim earnestly.

"Jim, he was shore set on killin' you. I begged him not to. An' he said he'd let you off—if I—I would make you ask me again—to marry you—an' take you up—So I promised."

Jim took Dunn's limp hand. "Slinger, she'd never have had to make me. I'd kept asking till doomsday."

"Ahuh. Then you're powerful fond of my kid sister. Wal, I cain't thank Gawd fer much—but I do fer thet."

"Oh, let's *do* somethin'," burst out Molly in desperation. "Hart, where's he shot bad?"

"Lord! he's shot bad all over," declared Merriwell.

The practical Molly prompted the stricken men to get busy and do what was possible for the wounded one. Jim believed the gunshot in the abdomen would have killed any ordinary man. It had gone clear through. They padded that and bound it up. He had another dangerous wound in the hip, which, according to Merriwell, like the hole in his abdomen, had been made with a rifle.

While they washed and dressed his wounds as best they could do it with limited means, Slinger talked:

"Sam throwed fust on me, when I was keepin' two eyes on Seth. An' he got me thet crack in the belly. It kneeled me over, or the fight'd been short an' sweet. I nailed Sam. Then Seth showed his true color at last. He dove fer the stall an' began shootin' from behind. He had a Colt an' a forty-four Winchester. An' he shore pumped lead into me. I sent a couple through the stall. Hit him, for he cussed hard. But he come back at me. Then I flopped over along the wall, where he couldn't see me onless he come out. He'd used up all his shells fer the Colt. Anyway, he didn't take risk to load, an' stuck to the rifle. Reckon thet beat him. I got to

the corner by the stall—leaned over quick—an' bored him—when he was tryin' to shift the rifle round."

He lay still, with closed eyes, a limp and ghastly sight. Molly sat beside him, supporting his head.

"I heah hosses," suddenly spoke up Dunn, opening his eyes.

Merriwell got up to walk out away from the cabin. "Bunch of cowboys comin'," he said excitedly. "Reckon I'd better make myself scarce."

Jim joined him. "No need to run, Merriwell. That's Curly Prentiss and some of my outfit."

"By gum! An' they've ketched Matty an' Fletch," ejaculated the other.

Curly rode down the slope, followed by Bud and Lonestar and Jackson Way, who had in tow the late fleeing members of the Cibeque.

Curly threw his bridle and slid to the ground. "Howdy, boss! Mawnin', Miss Molly!" he said, and lifted his sombrero from his bright hair. Then he bent his gaze upon the prostrate Dunn.

"Prentiss, you're a little late in the day," said Dunn. "But I'm recommendin' you let Matty an' Fletch go. I did. It was Jocelyn an' Seth an' Sam. Take a look in the cabin."

Curly did as he was bidden, returning promptly, a queer cold look in his eyes. "Wal, Slinger, it shore was a good job. But I'm sorry they got you."

Bud Chalfack and the cowboys came riding down, to halt before the group.

"Doggone, Jim, if it ain't fine to see you on yore feet," said Bud heartily. "How do, Molly. Somebody tell me what's come off."

Whereupon Jim briefly related the circumstances leading up to the stop at this cabin, the wrangle over the conditions of the ransom, the blackguard conduct of Jocelyn, and the several fights that succeeded. Jim emphasized the wit and courage and ferocity of Molly.

"Doggone me!" burst out Bud, with worshipful eyes on the girl. "Molly, I always knowed you was the sweetest and wonderfulest little devil in Arizonie, but now I jest haf to take off my hat to you." And he did it, quite gallantly.

Curly's encomium was directed at Jim. "You lucky son-of-a-gun! To come out heah an' steal her from us!" He threw off his gloves and knelt by Slinger. "Tell me just where he's shot."

Molly and Merriwell together gave him the desired information.

Curly got up, decisive though grave. "Mebbe he's a chance. You cain't kill some fellars. Jack, ride to Flag an' fetch back the doctor. Holliday, you an' Bud go back to camp an' pack some of our outfit over heah. Fetch the boss's pack an' don't fergit everythin' to make Miss Molly comfortable. Boss, do you want to hold these Cibeque men heah? I reckon if we let them go they'll haid Flick off with thet ransom money. An' we shore don't want to lose thet."

"Hold them, then, till Flick comes back," replied Jim. "You and I can take turns on guard."

"Wal, Traft," spoke up Matty, "if you'd like to know, we're so darn glad the way things hev come off thet we won't need watchin'!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Vigil

SLINGER DUNN sank into a pallid insensible state that Jim believed was the coma preceding death. Molly, too, succumbed to a fear that every moment would be his last. But the hours passed; the three prisoners played cards and made no trouble whatever; Curly and Jim erected a tarpaulin shelter over Dunn, and a spruce-bough bed for Molly beside him; they got supper from the coarse stores they found in Haverly's packs.

Night fell, and the wind moaned of the threatening storm. Molly sat close to her brother, leaning against the wall, silent and watchful. The only way she could ascertain that Dunn still lived was by touch, and when his pulse grew imperceptible and his hands cold she laid her head on his breast to listen to his heart.

Jim stayed up with her, and seldom left her, except to replenish the fire and take a look at the inside of the cabin, where the prisoners slept.

Sometimes Jim paced up and down, finding action helpful to the surcharged condition of his mind. In the dead of night there in that lonely forest he came to full appreciation of Molly's sterling worth and a deep respect for the primitive life that had developed her.

When he would approach her, as he did often, and sink down on one knee to peer at the pale Slinger, Molly would take hold of him. By the firelight he could see the big eyes, black as night, rest upon him with a glance that made him wonder how life had come to reward him so beautifully.

The night grew very dark and still, the formidable hour before dawn when even the life of the forest seemed at lowest ebb. Slinger would go soon, Jim thought.

Molly called him. "He whispered somethin' just now," she said. "I think he called for Seth's sister. He was sweet on her. She'll hate even his memory now."

Jim sat with her then, silently awaiting the end, holding her against him. It seemed the most melancholy and poignant of all the long night hours. How welcome the first gray streaks! A fine misty rain began to fall. Daylight at last with Slinger Dunn still not dead!

Curly appeared around the corner of the cabin. "Mawnin', you babes in the woods," he said, and dropped beside them, to lean over Dunn. "Wal, Slinger, old man, I reckoned you'd be long where the blue flags an' the cornflowers blow." He placed his ear over Dunn's heart and listened.

"Wal, you both got the willies," he declared, as he rose with a glad smile. "He ain't goin' to croak."

"Oh, Curly!" cried Molly in an agony of hope.

"Shore he'll live. I ain't no doctor but I've seen a heap of fellars pass out. An' Slinger don't show no earmarks of thet this mawnin'."

Molly's little remaining strength eked out here and she collapsed in Jim's arms. He let her gently down on the bed of spruce and covered her over. "Go to sleep, honey," he said.

"Boss, it's beginnin' to rain," announced Curly. "Let's rig up another tarp heah for Slinger."

They stretched a tarpaulin over the makeshift canvas shelter. "Thet'll

do fer a spell. But say, boss, how aboot them stiffs in there?"

"They'll have to be buried, of course."

Molly slept on, and even the bells on the Diamond pack horses ringing down the slope did not wake her.

"Howdy, boys! Sure glad to see you," said Jim, running his eye over the group. "Where's Hump and Uphill?"

"Don't know. Cherry will tell you what he thinks, an' it ain't no cheerful news," announced Bud.

"What's up, Cherry?" queried Jim, approaching Winters, who was dismounting.

"Boss, I reckon Stevens an' Frost hev struck somethin' out at the head of Derrick. We left a note fer them to hit our trail. An' I reckon they'll be along, mebbe tonight."

Jim did not see in Cherry's words much to be worried about. But still less did he like Cherry's expression than the hint in Bud's remark. "Well, unpack and make camp," he ordered. "If Dunn pulls through we'll have to stay here for days. Put up the little tent for Molly, if you fetched it. But the first thing after you unpack, bury these dead men."

The rain held off till early in the afternoon, when it began to fall in earnest. Molly slept on through it all, dry and snug under shelter and blanket. Slinger showed no change.

The cowboys' labors were interrupted by the arrival of Jack Way and Dr. Shields. Jim did not think it necessary to awaken Molly. The job would be gruesome and she would insist on helping.

Dr. Shields felt of Dunn's pulse and heart, and said, "Hum!" which meant little to Jim. Then he cut open Dunn's blood-caked garments, and went to work, and with Jim's assistance, in an hour had all six wounds dressed.

To Jim's amazement Slinger opened his eyes. No doubt all the while he had been conscious. "You ought to be a hoss doctor," he said. "Hurtin' me wuss'n the bullets. Am I goin' to cash?"

Suddenly Molly sat up, wide-eyed and bewildered.

"Hullo, wood mouse! You've shore slept a lot," said Dunn.

"Oh, Arch!—Jim!"

"Molly, this is Dr. Shields from Flag. He has just attended to your brother's wounds, and—"

But Jim could not reply to Molly's mutely questioning eyes. And Dr. Shields, blunt as he was, shrank from their glowing, eager look.

"Molly, I'm further from bein' daid than last night," spoke up Slinger for himself.

"Don't talk. Don't move," admonished the doctor, and he led Jim and Molly away. "Very likely he told the truth," continued Shields presently. "I can't make predictions. He ought to have passed out long ago. If he lasts till tomorrow I'd say there was hope. I'll stay."

The three Cibeque men became restless as the afternoon grew late and Boyd Flick did not return.

"Traft, you look fagged out," said Dr. Shields when night fell. "Go to bed. I'll keep tab on Dunn and wake you if there's any turn for the worse. He simply amazes me."

Jim slipped under Molly's shelter to encourage her and say good night. "Molly, you'll not sit up all night again? Dr. Shields said he'd watch."

"I'll lay down when I get sleepy," she said. "Jim, I'm beginnin' to hope."

"So am I," replied Jim, and put his arms around her. After a long moment she stirred, then returned his embrace, and just brushed his cheek with her lips. Thrilled and content, he bade her good night.

He sought his own bed and slept till the ring of ax and stirring of men roused him. It was a dark, wet, gray dawn, but the rain had ceased. While pulling on his boots, he heard Curly speak:

"Wal, Doc, how's your patient this mawnin'?"

"I give up, Prentiss. You cowboys are not made of flesh and blood. Dunn just asked for a cigarette," replied the doctor.

Jim went to the fire in a hurry. "Then he must be—be—" he faltered.

"Traft, I reckon he'll pull through. I'll look him over after breakfast. Then you can send a man with me. I'd like to hurry."

Jim had to restrain himself from rushing in to Molly. At the breakfast call she appeared, pale, yet somehow glowing. Dr. Shields seemed vastly relieved.

"Miss Molly, you can rest easy," he said. "Your brother will live. Traft, I'm leaving only a few instructions. If fever sets in send for me. If not, in about ten days make a canvas litter and have four men pack him to the road, where you can safely haul him in a wagon to Flag."

When the genial doctor had finished giving directions regarding further care and diet, and ridden away with his guide, Bud ejaculated plaintively: "Nourishin' soup! Beef tea! I need somethin' like thet myself."

"Curly, suppose you and Bud split some shingles and repair the cabin roof," Jim suggested dryly. "That's what you boys need. Good hard work."

"Wal, fer cripe's sake!" exploded Bud.

"Come on, Bud," said Curly, with resignation. "No turkey huntin' this heah mawnin'." They hailed Cherry on the way out: "You're helpin' us split shingles."

"Who said so?" demanded that worthy, affronted.

"We said so. Orders from the boss."

It was well that Jim had advised this job, for no sooner had it been completed than the swift-moving clouds rolled up black and the rain poured down in a gray deluge. It rained all day. The cooped-up cowboys talked and played cards and joked and quarreled. Once Jim heard a thought-provoking speech from Curly, evidently made in deep argument: "Wal, *I* tell you gazabos there's only one man in Arizonie who could fill Jocelyn's boots on the Diamond."

It stormed that night, a regular equinoctial gale. The old cabin groaned and threatened to fly away on the wings of the wind. But toward morning the fury of the storm abated. When daylight came the sky was fast clearing, the air had a keen, cold edge, and the color of the forest had perceptibly changed.

Jim went outside to wash. The morning was beautiful, with rose and gold clouds skimming the tree tops, and the sky a deep blue. He was wiping his face with his scarf when Curly and Bud appeared, each with a rifle and a fine turkey gobbler.

Jim swore mildly at them. "You went wild turkey hunting without taking me! It's a low-down trick. When I've been waiting and longing to go—I'll get even with you."

Vociferously and in unison Curly and Bud gave evidence of their regret and how they would make amends that very day. However it turned out that Jim would not leave Molly. Her brother was in agony most of the time, with fever threatening, and not until late did he grow easier. They were all concerned about Slinger, except Curly, who said:

"Wal, the third day is the wust. From now on he'll mend fast."

Next morning, however, Jim routed Curly and Bud out so early that they could not see even a tree for half an hour.

"Boss, wild turkeys is wild, shore, but they ain't owls," complained Bud.

And Curly vowed that Jim was not going to be permitted to shoot a turkey while still on the roost. "Thet's pot-huntin', boss, an' not sporty a-tall."

"After eating that turkey drumstick last night, I'd perpetrate any kind of a dark deed to get another," averred Jim.

"Didn't I tell you? Wal, now don't talk so much an' mebbe, if it ever gits daytime, we'll see a flock," rejoined Curly.

Daylight came, with rosy color and nipping air, with frost like diamonds on the grama grass, and so quiet that a falling aspen leaf rustled loudly. Evidently they had come up to the head of the park, for they crossed a brook and passed a tumble-down log cabin, where Hack Jocelyn had planned to hide with Molly and wait for the ransom. Curly remarked about how the designs of crooked men went wrong more often than right.

"Flick ought to ride in today," he added. "He might be cute enough to savvy the way the deal has turned out an' skedaddle with the money."

"Hist!" Bud whispered. "Shet up, you elocuteners! Turkey!"

It was a great day. They rode into camp at dusk with two beautiful hen turkeys and a big gobbler. But the excitement of the hunt was dispelled by an astonishing fact. Boyd Flick had ridden into camp with the ransom money, which he was glad indeed to get rid of, and he and the other three members of the Cibeque were packing to leave.

They had breakfast with Jim's party, bade them and Slinger goodby, and rode away into the forest, manifestly glad to get off so easily with whole skins.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Offer and Acceptance

THAT morning Dunn showed a decided turn for the better, and Jim, losing all his misgivings, was happy for Molly.

The atmosphere of the camp grew merry, with only one drawback now, and that was the failure of Hump Stevens and Uphill Frost to arrive. Jim grasped that the cowboys were concealing anxiety from him, if not more. He decided to send Jackson Way and Cherry Winters to Tobe's Well to ascertain if the missing cowboys were there.

They had supper at four o'clock, after which Jim started off with Molly for a walk, so happy to be alone with her he was scarcely able to contain himself. And after he got out of sight of camp he no longer did.

"Jim, are we goin' huntin' or makin' love?" queried Molly.

"Can't we do both?"

"No. If you keep huggin' me an' kissin' my ear—how am I to watch where I'm goin'?"

They climbed a slope, scaring squirrels, rabbits, and deer on the way, and came out on top of a ridge where the forest made Jim ache with its wildness and beauty.

Jim stopped resolutely. "Now, would you mind kissing me?" he asked.

"Jim, you put such store on my kisses," she replied wistfully. "I reckon they're not—not so precious as you imagine."

"Yes, they are, Molly."

"I told you once—I—I'd been kissed a lot," she went on, shamefaced yet brave. "Not that I was willin'. An' now I know what love is I—I wish my lips had been for you alone, Jim."

"No, Molly. You were a child. That you can feel as you do now is enough for me, regarding the past. I couldn't begin to tell you how I love and respect you."

She kissed him then, absorbed with the seriousness of it, rather than the sweetness of surrender.

Resting often, they made their way back down through the forest, across the park, into camp.

On the following day Slinger Dunn had improved so materially that Jim began to hope it would be safe to move him at the end of another week, perhaps sooner. That forced him to consider the coming situation. Mrs. Dunn had been sent word by Boyd Flick that Molly was safe, and her brother mending favorably. Jim began to incline to a plan to take Molly also into town. The very good excuse of a wounded brother would suffice. How about the Flagerstown feminine contingent when they scented this romance? Jim indulged in a gleeful laugh. Uncle Jim might be destined to have his heartfelt desire fulfilled long before he anticipated any hope of it. But Molly was so young—hardly 18.

Another perturbing question, for the moment, was the continued failure of Hump and Uphill to appear. Probably they would show up soon with Jack and Cherry. Jim dismissed that, too, as something to be combatted another and perhaps more favorable day.

Early in the afternoon he slipped off alone. He wished to have a long, lonely walk in the forest. It turned out, however, that he did not go far—hardly out of range of Jeff's ringing ax on a dead aspen log.

Frost had turned the aspens gold. The wonderous hue blazed against sky and forest. All the tranquil little glade appeared to have absorbed light from the aspen leaves that quivered so delicately and silently, each separate one fluttering like a golden moth.

Jim sat down and gloated over these quaking aspens, and the towering pines and spruces. A hawk sailed across the blue opening above. A dreamy hum pervaded the forest. He did not wonder at a backwoodsman. Here was strange, full, strength-giving life. Molly Dunn seemed a composite of all that he saw and felt there.

The West had dealt harshly with him, yet made greater amends. He had served his apprenticeship under these fire-spirited cowboys; and he sensed more and yet more hardships, problems, pangs, of that elemental range life.

Jim wrought over his many failings like a blacksmith hammering malleable iron. If he must build drift fences, he would do well to add something of Slinger Dunn to his conception of Curly Prentiss, in his intelligent acceptance of that which made a Westerner. That was the clearest of his many hours of self-teaching.

Late afternoon found Jim descending the slope toward camp. He espied a curling column of blue smoke after he had smelled a camp fire. Saddle horses in camp, grazing with dragging bridles! He quickened his pace. Probably the cowboys had returned. He made sure of this when he saw Cherry's pinto horse hobbling up the park.

Approaching from behind the cabin, he could not see anyone until he turned the corner. But he had heard a merry voice and a deep laugh. There outside the cabin on a bench sat his uncle, holding Molly's hand. Jim was thunderstruck.

"Uncle! Where'd you come from?" he exploded.

"Howdy, son! I rode in with Locke a while ago," replied Traft, his keen eyes sweeping Jim from head to toe. "I haven't been lonesome, as you see."

"I do see," replied Jim, and he could have shouted to the skies. Molly did not look as if she wanted to run from Uncle Jim. A blush slowly rose under tear-stained cheeks.

Traft exposed the back of Molly's little supple, brown hand, on a finger of which the diamond sparkled, as if in gay betrayal. "Son, I see you've been goin' in debt for diamonds," he drawled.

Molly gently disengaged her hand. "If you'll excuse me I—I'll run back to Arch," she said shyly, and fled.

Traft looked up at Jim. "You pie-eatin', soft-spoken, hard-fisted Mizzourie son-of-a-gun!" he ejaculated.

"Yes?" returned Jim hopefully.

"Doc Shields told me first of these doin's," went on the rancher. "So Locke an' I hooked up the buckboard an' dragged a couple of saddle horses along. We left the team at Keech's where—but that'll wait. Curly told me the whole business. So did Bud. I had a little talk with Slinger. An' then I got hold of Molly—Jim, you've done it. Winnin' the Diamond was a real job, but nothin' to that girl. It took me a minute to fall in love with her myself, an' a whole hour to get the story out of her. Son, she's real Western stuff."

"I—I'm awful glad you like her—Uncle Jim," said Jim, and, weak in the knees, he sat down.

"So much for that. We can come back to it later— I've got tough news."

"Uncle, I can stand anything now," replied Jim.

"Hump Stevens is at Keech's, all shot up, but I reckon not so bad as Slinger," went on Traft. "I had him hauled to Flag. Up Frost got to town night before last, an' he's crippled. Up told me he an' Hump run plumb into some of the Hash Knife outfit, cuttin' your drift fence, an' there was a bit of a fight. Hump thinks he killed one of the gang. There was five of them, an' they rode off with one hangin' across a saddle. Then Up packed Hump across to Keech's an' come on in to town."

"Hash Knife outfit! Uncle, who and what is this Hash Knife outfit?"

"Humph! They're a heap, son. The Hash Knife used to be the king-pin cow outfit of central Arizona. That

was twenty years ago. Now, it's got the Cibeque beat to a frazzle for hard-nut hombres, exceptin' Slinger. Old cowboys, gunmen, rustlers!—wal, the last nine miles of your drift fence is down, but you've still got up sixty miles or more. An' that'll have to do for this year. Fact is, I'm more than satisfied. I'm darn proud of you, Jim."

"Thank you, Uncle. But soon as I see what's to be done about Slinger and—and Molly, we'll go right back to fence building."

"No more till next spring, Jim. You don't savvy. That end of the Diamond is high, an' this storm spelled winter. The cattle had drifted off before this snow came. Two feet at Tobe's Well now, an' deeper as you climb south. Listen! I've got an idee that may suit you, since Molly Dunn talked so hopefully about her brother. It seems *she* thinks you had good influence on Slinger. Wal, follow it up. If you can get Slinger Dunn into the Diamond—why, you'll have it all over the Hash Knife. Son, it's turnin' tricks like this that is genuine Western."

"I had that idea myself, Uncle!"

"All right, then. Let's put our heads together. We've got to take Slinger to town, an' so we'll take Molly along. Then we'll send for her folks an' keep them at the ranch. I wouldn't rush that kid into marryin', not before a year. She's backward, an' it'd be good for her to meet people, an'—"

"Great! Uncle, you're just the finest ever!" cried Jim with enthusiasm. "Molly could go to school, or at least have private lessons, and what could not that bright girl learn in six months?"

"You'll have some trouble talkin' Slinger into it, mebbe," went on Traft. "I sat talkin' to him a little while. He's got one weakness shore, an' that's Molly. An' I'll gamble he has another—a ranch. Play these cards strong."

"Ranch?" queried Jim eagerly.

"Shore. I happen to own the Yellow-Jacket. It's a big, wild range, run down, with only a few thousand head of stock. I took it over on notes of Blodgett's not long ago. Some rustlin' down there. It's a fine winter range. Just the place for the Diamond this next six months. You talk up the Yellow-Jacket to Dunn. Tell him you'll take him in with you as partner, or half shares, providin' he'll throw in with the Diamond. That'll fetch him, unless you an' Molly have him figured wrong."

Jim got up trembling, and put a strong hand on Traft's shoulder. "Uncle Jim! I couldn't ask more in this world—than—"

But he choked over that utterance and rushed round the cabin to drop in upon Molly and Slinger. Dunn was half sitting up and looked better, especially as one of the boys had shaved him, and his face had regained some of its clean tan. Jim swallowed hard and strove for calmness. He did not dare look at Molly.

"Howdy, Slinger! You seem to be doing fine. We'll be riding you into Flag, pronto. We'll take Molly along an' go right to Uncle Jim's ranch. And send for your father and mother to come up. You see, Slinger, it's this way. Molly and I will be getting married in a—a year or so—" here a half-stifled gasp at his elbow interrupted him "—and you know, she's pretty much of a kid. We won't let her go back to the Cibeque—ever—except, of course, on visits—and you just

ought to be where you can see her often."

"I reckon I ought," agreed Dunn.

"Fine. I thought you'd agree. Now, here's another angle. Do you happen to know the Yellow-Jacket ranch?"

"I shore do."

"What kind of a place is it?"

"Wal, no ranch to brag aboot—only a cabin an' corrals. But, Lord, what a range! Water an' grass an' timber!"

"Uncle has turned it over to me, lock, stock, and barrel," laughed Jim. "Only three thousand head of cattle. But great possibilities for development. Now, Slinger, I want you to go in with me—be my partner in making a big ranch out of the Yellow-Jacket."

Dunn grew quite red in the face for him. "Molly, is this heah fellar of yours drunk or crazy?" he asked, turning to her.

"I—I don't quite know—Arch," she faltered. "But I reckon you can trust him."

"Sure there's a string to the offer, Slinger. There always is—in business deals. Sure it's a big chance for you—not to say how wonderful for Molly. But I'm quite selfish in the matter. You're more than worth the deal to me, provided, of course, you agree to my terms."

"Ahuh. An' what's them terms, Jim Traft?" queried Dunn.

"Do you happen to know the Hash Knife outfit?"

"Better'n anyone who rides the Diamond."

"Well, it was the Hash Knife outfit who cut the last nine miles of our fence. Next spring we'll go back on the job. Slinger, to complete that fence and keep it *up*, I need you. Savvy? Will you throw in with me and the Diamond?"

"Lord! Jest gimme the chanct!" replied Dunn hoarsely.

"Here's my hand. And with it is an end of the bad blood between us."

Molly's arms twined about him. "*Mizzourie Jim!*" she whispered. And between Jim and Slinger, while yet their hands gripped, intervened a pale little face, with wet eyes, dark in passionate gratitude, with red parted lips that came up and up and up—

"Wal, Jim, I reckon thet'll be aboot all!" said Slinger Dunn.

THE END

The young lady from the East, attending her first rodeo, watched wide-eyed as the cowboy on the twisting, plunging Brahma's back kept his spurs raking the animal's flanks, as required by the rules.

"He's shore scratchin' that critter plenty, now ain't he?" roared an old-timer sitting beside her.

"Yes, and I do think it's nice of him," she smiled sweetly. "The way that cow's wriggling, she must be itching something terrible."

A Puzzle Story

The Keg of Old Bourbon

By ???

THIS TALE *poses a riddle for the reader. Based on the plot of one of the best-known stories of a great American writer, it has been transposed into the background and idiom of the West. Can you guess the title and author of the story which served as the pattern? The correct answer is revealed in the "Free-for-All" department.*

IF JIM MASON had deliberately set out to make an enemy of me, he couldn't have done a better job of it than he did. Of course, he didn't really aim to—he was just plain ornery, grasping, mean, and know-it-all. He did a lot to me in his time, and I took it for a long while, but a man can only stand so much—you know that. I swore I'd get even.

I was always known around these parts as an easy-going hombre, and I went right along keeping my gate shut. I figured I'd have my revenge in time, but it had to be done right, with no loose ends. There wasn't any use in trying to get even until I was plumb sure the time was ripe.

Understand, now, I never let on to Mason how I hated him. I always showed a saw-toothed grin to that coyote's face.

Jim Mason had one soft spot, though on the whole he was tough as saddle leather and meaner than a centipede with chilblains. He claimed to be the best judge of whisky in the whole of Mesquite County. Well, on most

things that counted he was just a tinhorn, but where nose paint was concerned I guess maybe he was a top hand all right. I'll give him that much. Most cowmen will drink anything that don't bite them first, but not Jim Mason—he'd ride a wide range for a drink of good liquor, and I knew it.

It was one night during Rodeo Week that I ran onto him, along some time after dusk. He grabbed my hand and started pumping it like I'd been reported scalped by Apaches and he was my best friend. His eyes were all bloodshot and bleary, and I could see he'd been busy wearing callouses on his elbows in some saloon. He had all spraddled out in his Sunday best—loud silk shirt, tight britches, fancy boots, and spurs with jingle bobs that tinkled when he walked.

"Howdy, Jim," I said. "Looks like you been gatherin' up a talkin' load. I was hopin' I could get somebody to come out to test some good whisky, but I guess mebbe you've had yore limit already."

"Limit, hell!" he exploded. "I've just about wet my whistle—what kinda stuff's this yo're talkin' about?"

"Some dude salesman came by the other day and sold me a keg of what he claimed was twelve-year-old bourbon."

"Twelve-year-old bourbon? A keg? I don't hardly believe it, Bob."

"Well, I kinda doubt it myself," I said, "but it looked like a bargain to me. I was wishin' I had yore say-so on it at the time, but o' course you wasn't around."

"Twelve-year-old bourbon." Mason muttered, looking at me kind of speculative-like.

"I prob'ly been tooken," I said, doing my damndest to look humble.

"Twelve-year-old bourbon!" he said louder, his red-rimmed eyes beginning to light up as he thought over the idea.

"I shore would like to find out if it's honest-to-God stuff. Seein's how you're busy, I guess I'll look up Tom Blakely. He's got a nose fer good whisky, and he ought t' be able—"

"Tom Blakely cain't tell good whisky from gypsum water!" Mason butted in.

"Well, I dunno about thet—some of the boys allow as how his judgment of liquor's better'n yores."

"Hell it is—o'mon, le's go."

"Go? Go where?" I said, innocent-like.

"Out t' yore spread."

"Oh, no, not tonight, Jim. It's a large evenin' shapin' up here in town, and yo're all set to howl."

"I ain't doin' a thing thet cain't wait, Bob," he said, as solemn as he could. "You got yore rig?"

"Wal, yes, but it's a long drive out there, Jim."

"Le's go, and quit thet blabbin'. Twelve-year-old bourbon—'fraid you've been tooken like a tenderfoot, Bob. Tom Blakely—hmpfh—why, hell, he cain't tell good whisky from coffin varnish!"

Mason spit and grabbed my arm. I pulled my John B. down over my eyes and led him around the corner to where my rig was tied.

We got in, I gave the team a lick with the reins, and off we started. The night, a hundred yards out of town, was as black as a blacksmith's apron.

A little way out, I pulled a bottle from under the seat. "This ain't the stuff I was tellin' you about," I said,

"but it's colder'n a dead snake t'night, and a leetle shot'll do the both of us good."

He took a long pull on the bottle. "Ain't bad," he said, and sent another down to keep the first one company before he handed it over to me.

The ranch was deserted—all hands and the cook had gone into town for the rodeo and accompanying doings. Mason followed me into the kitchen, and I lit a lamp.

"A bird cain't fly on one wing," I said, and handed him the bottle.

He took another big drink. "Le's see 'at twelve-year-old bourbon," he said, his tongue thick.

"I got it cached down cellar," I said, lighting a lantern and heading toward the door that opened on the cellar stairs. "Watch yore step goin' down, Jim—it's kinda tricky footin'."

The tinkling of the jingle bobs on his spurs sounded loud in my ears as he followed me down the steps, plenty unsteady. About the third one from the bottom he stumbled and sprawled on his face on the cellar floor.

I helped him to his feet. "Mebbe we better postpone this to some other time," I said. "Yo're not in very good shape, Mason."

He waved me away, muttering, "Wanna taste 'at twelve-year-ole bourbon, boy. Where's it at?"

The lantern light fell on the new bricks of the cellar wall as I led Mason down toward the farther end. I told him I had been bricking up the place to use for dry storage, though he didn't seem interested. "It'll be a tol'able good cellar when I get her finished," I concluded, as we neared the new wall's uncompleted end.

"Shore, Bob, shore," Mason answered in that superior tone he'd been using on me for years. "Jus' show me 'at bourbon. I'll soon tell yuh if it's all it's claimed t'be."

I set the lantern down. Just ahead of us was an unenclosed space about four feet wide, three deep, and four high—a hole scooped out of the soft earth in the still unbricked portion of the cellar wall.

"The keg's in here," I said, pointing into the hole.

Mason leaned forward, lurching unsteadily as he reached his hand in to feel around, and I saw the saliva dribbling down from his opened lips just before I hit him over the head with the butt of my Colt.

He crumpled to the floor with a grunt. I tied his arms and legs and propped him up in the hole.

Then I jerked the tarp off a pile of bricks and mortar, which I had mixed beforehand. Swiftly, but unhurriedly, I began laying bricks across the opening.

I had laid three rows when I heard his spurs jingle. He was coming to.

I went right on working. When I had finished three more rows, he began to talk. The drunken look had gone from his eyes—and in its place was fear.

"What the hell kind of joke is this?" he croaked, cold sober now.

I clamped my jaws and laid another row, then still another.

"God a'mighty, man—yo're not goin' to bury me alive?" It was a kind of half-choked scream, but it sounded plenty sweet to me. I'd waited a hell of a long time for this.

He said a lot more, I don't recall just what, probably because I couldn't understand it at the time. I guess it was mostly curses, but it seems to me

now that he begged considerable, and yelled for help.

"Nobody'll hear you but the coyotes," I told him.

His screams bounced back into his face like rain—bounced back off those nice, new bricks.

And I went on laying bricks until I came to the last row.

"Mason!" I called.

No answer.

"MASON!"

Still no answer.

I held the lantern up to the narrow opening. The only sound I could hear was a faint tinkle from the jingle bobs on Jim Mason's spurs.

I felt a little sick to my stomach. I breathed hard—I had been working fast.

Then I laid the last row. My cellar wall was finished.

That was ten years ago. Since that time a lot of folks have said nice things about that fine brick wall in my ranchhouse cellar.

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The Story of the Lucky Louse
or Blood Will Tell

By G. EZRA DANE and BEATRICE J. DANE

YES, "Them was the days!" is an apt introductory comment for such a narrative of the early gold-rush days in California as this one, told by the old-timer who was there to savor them. One of many related about the Mother Lode town of Columbia by these authors, it takes us back to the fantastic days when a miner paid a dollar for a shave—and the barber made himself a neat bonus by panning out the whiskers at the end of the day.

NO, SIR, nobody has a better right than me to set on this stump. I planted the old poplar myself on the corner here, nearly 60 years ago. It had got to be three foot through at the ground, as you can see, and it must of been 80 feet high. But the roots begun to upheave the sidewalk bricks, and when the limbs would blow they'd brush the shakes off the awning of Mike Rehm's Pioneer Saloon, so the old tree had to come down.

Well, they must come an end to all things, no matter how great or how good. With men, and trees, and towns, it's all the same. And so it is with me. I grew up with this old town and I've come down with it.

Here I set like an old owl or fox amongst the boulders and think of the days and times that used to be. Them days and these! Them days and these! It's like day and night, day and night. Oh, them was the days, I can tell you. Yes, sir, them was the days of great depravitation and plenty of whisky.

A fellow didn't have to travel, in them days, to see the world. The whole world come here then with samples of all kinds of humanity. The gold, that was what they all come for, of course. They followed the track of it, in '48 and '49 and '50, like you'll see chickens follow a trail of corn, pecking and scratching away after it, up the Stanislaus River and the Tuolomne into these Sierra foothills, then along Wood's Creek, and acrost Shaw's Flat and up the main gulch here, that we called Miner's Avenue.

March 1850, that's when the first miners reached this flat—Dr. Thaddeus Hildreth and his party—and the five of them averaged 15 pounds of gold a day for three days. Why, even a lazy man could do pretty well in diggin's as rich as that. You take, for instance, one of these first comers, he was even too lazy to wash his drawers. To save himself the work of scrubbing them, he just tied them to a limb that overhung a little stream and let them dangle in the water. He figured, you see, that the current would wash them for him overnight. And the next morning when he come to fish them out, lo and b'God! he found his drawers gold-plated.

Well—with stories like that a-spreading, it's no wonder that Columbia's population grew from five men to 6,000 in six weeks. A good many of them, of course, went out like they had come in—with the next rush to another new discovery. But others come that built, and made the camp a town, and the town a city. Yes, sir, the greatest on the Mother Lode it was in its day, and they called it the Gem of the Southern Mines.

Well, that's the way it was. Columbia was born of gold; yes, and died of it. It practically ate itself up, the old town did. When the miners had scraped the land down to bedrock all around, then they begun to close in on the town itself. One house after another came down for the sake of the rich ground underneath. These few old buildings that still straggle along Main Street here, you see, either they've been mined under without falling down or they happened to be built in places where the bedrock come near the surface and the gold was scarce.

So that's the way the miners come

in, like a swarm of locusts. They stripped the country bare, right down to its poor old limestone bones, and then they left.

To look at the old place now, you wouldn't believe that it used to be as I remember it. I can set here and look down this street and see it as it was.

Toward the end of the afternoon the men would come in from the diggin's in Matelot Gulch and from Miners' Avenue, and off Gold Hill and from Gold Springs and Murphy's Defeat and Texas Flat and the diggin's out Springfield way, and down from French Camp and Italian Bar and Pine Log on the South Fork of the Stanislaus, and from Yankee Hill and from Martinez and Sawmill Flat. Say, that was a sight you ought to see! The street was so packed with people that a fellow could hardly cross. He'd just be carried along with the stream of humanity. The crowd would surge back and forth, and it was made up of all sorts and conditions of people from everywhere.

You'd see all kinds of dress, from frock coats and ruffled shirts and fancy vests down to red or blue flannel shirts with no coats or vests at all and old pants tucked into heavy boots. These pants would be held up along with a pistol and knife and other hardware, by a good stout belt; and they'd be held together by patches. Usually the patches would be made from flour sacks, each man advertising his favorite brand. Now you take, for instance, they was a fellow one time showed up with the label *Self-Rising Flour* right acrost the seat of his pants, and he was "Self-Rising Bill" from that day on.

Yes, and patches wasn't all they used the flour sacks for. A man didn't ever have to go without socks if he had a couple of flour sacks. He'd put his foot on the sack near one end and he'd fold the corners and the front end over the top of his foot, and then he'd bring the other end up in back over the heel and wrap it around his ankle and leg and pull his boot on over it, and that was called the "California sock."

Yes, sir, and when the women began to come in, they found the flour sack mighty useful, too. Old Mr. Bell that had the flouring mill down on Wood's Creek below Sonora—you can see his stone dam yet where the old mill stood—he used to tell how, time of the big flood at Sonora, when the creek overflowed and the women came squealing and splashing out of the houses with their skirts lifted up to their waists, of course they showed considerable of their homemade underwear, and under each lifted skirt the crowd could read: *Bell's Flouring Mills*. Yes, sir, old Mr. Bell always said that was the best advertising he ever got, and it didn't cost him a cent.

So they was variety in the dress then at any rate, and a man could express his fancy, as well as his preference in grocery goods. One style that had its run was for white shirts with some threads drawn out and the rest caught up in patterns and designs—and showing through this fancy openwork, a red flannel undershirt.

You'd see headgear of all kinds, too, and all shapes and varieties, from tall silk hats to sailor caps, but mostly black felts with wide brims and with crowns either creased or else conical and flat on top, in Spanish

style. And whiskers, say, you'd see all colors and styles of whiskers carved out in every pattern a man could imagine. It wasn't quite respectable then, you know, for a man to shave his beard off clean and let his face stick up bare out of his collar; it made him look like a gambler.

There wasn't any one style of anything, because these people, you see, they had come here from all parts of the world. Each nationality brought the ideas and customs of its own country and then they all got mixed up together, and each borrowed from the others until it was all just one grand conglomeration. Any evening on Main Street you could hear eight or ten different languages by the time you walked down one side and back the other: Spanish, and English of every brand from Cornwall to County Pike, and German, and French, and Italian, and Chinese, and Yiddish, and Kanaka, and a little Me-wuk Indian thrown in.

And all the men you'd see was young. You'd never see a gray-haired man in the streets unless it was an old grizzled Indian or a Mexican. To get here then, you see, you had to come round the Horn or over the Isthmus or by wagon or horseback or afoot acrost the plains. It was just too hard for the old folks; they wouldn't attempt it. In the mining camps the ages ranged mostly from 16 to 30; anybody over 35 was decrepit.

Well, perhaps now you can repopulate this old deserted street from your imagination, like I can from my memory. You can picture the miners crowded in the stores waiting their turn to get supplies. At Pachoe's Exchange and at D. O. Mill's Bank that Sleeper took over in '58 they'd be long cues of miners lined up to sell their dust. William Daegner, the first Wells Fargo Agent, kept his office open night and day to buy it. Why, of a Saturday afternoon I've seen a line of men from Knapp's store at the corner of Main and State the full block down Main Street, then acrost Fulton and up the stairs to Sleeper's Gold exchange. Often a man would pay five or ten dollars to get a place near the head of the line.

Well, they'd march in and shake out the dust into the scoop, and old man Sleeper, he'd blow through the blower, to blow out the sand, you know. He wasn't too careful how hard he blowed, either, because any dust that spilled on the carpet they could clean up afterwards. That's like they say the barbers done; they'd shave the miners all day at a dollar a shave, and then in the evening they'd make another eight or ten dollars by panning out the whiskers.

Well, old Sleeper, after he'd finished with the blower, he'd weigh up what was left and give the man a tab with the value written on, and at the next window Charlie Sleeper—he was the old man's son—he'd pay out the exchange in gold and silver coin.

They had a sign in there: *No mistakes rectified after you leave the counter*. And that sign meant what it said.

My father was purse bearer for a company of miners, and one Saturday he went into Sleeper's Exchange to cash the week's clean-up. But when they came to divide it afterward, they found they had two $20 pieces too much. So father got in line again and when he come to Charlie Sleeper's window he says, "You made a mistake on my exchange," he says.

"No mistakes rectified after you leave the counter," says Charlie.

"Hold on!" Father says. "You give me forty dollars too much."

"Makes no difference," says Charlie. "That rule works both ways. Put it in your pocket," he says, "and don't hold up the line!"

Well, when they got their money, them as was working partners, they'd go out and declare dividends in the street, or in a saloon, or in somebody's house. Now you take for instance what old Mrs. Barron, a Cornish woman, used to tell. When first she come here in the '50s, she was a little girl then. and her family lived in Springfield. The cousin Jacks—that's what we called them Cornish Miners—liked to come to their house for tea and saffron cake. Well, they was four of them, partners, that when they cleaned up their sluices, would come with their gold and borrow four teacups in place of scales. They'd divide the gold in these four cups. When they got it evened up the best they could by the eye, they'd turn their faces to the wall and the little girl, she'd pick up the cups and put one in the hands of each man. That way they could be no disagreement, you see, if it turned out that one fellow had a dollar or two more than another.

Then, when the miners had got their gold exchanged, and the money in their pockets, the next thing was to pay debts. They'd always have to pay the saloonkeepers first and in full, because credit wouldn't last with them. Then they'd settle with the storekeepers. What they had left, they'd set out to look for ways to spend it. They's nothing burns the fingers like gold hot from the mines, you know, and the miner has mighty tender fingers when it comes to hanging on to it. Then too, they was always plenty of fellows ready to oblige by helping to separate the miner and his gold.

First of all, of course, was the saloons. About 30 of them they was at one time, and the men would be lined up often five and six deep at the bars. And in all the saloons you'd hear singing—singing in every language—and that was singing, too! The fellows would get a few drinks, and then they'd begin to sing, and more would join in until they'd be a regular chorus. Some of the places would have violins and different instruments, and their players would strike up and play for the boys.

Oh, they was excitement and turmoil all the time, but some of the greatest excitements and the greatest turmoils was when Julia Dean, the actress, come to town, or the famous Chapman Family, or Junius Brutus Booth, or Kelly, the great violinist. Them was extra occasions, that brought all the men in from the diggin's. The boys would be excited for two or three days before Julia Dean come, and they'd go out and meet the stage miles away and escort her into town.

She'd bring her troupe with her and they'd play for several days in Cardinell's Terpsichore Hall. That was a real theater with a board floor and chairs and a stage. It was an elegant place compared to some she had to perform in. In one camp the troupe had to play in an old Mexican *pelota* or handball court with a dirt floor, where the miners staked out their places just like they'd stake out claims, you know.

She was a mighty clever actress, Julia was, and such a pretty creature and so graceful, and they was so few pretty women here; the miners just went crazy about her. When she took her curtain call, the stage would be fair covered with buckskin purses. But the boys found they wasn't noise enough in the thump of these purses of gold dust to express their feelings, so they took to throwing silver dollars till they was hardly any left in town.

Then she'd have invitations from the owners of the different rich mines, like the Cannonade at Santiago Gulch, to come there and visit them and let them entertain her. They'd escort her out to their diggin's and give her a pan of rich dirt to pan out, slipping in extra gold, you know, that they thought she didn't see. Of course she'd make an attempt to wash it, but she wouldn't know how to go about it, so some miner would take the pan to do it for her and maybe he'd slip in some more nuggets and a handful of dust; and all this went to Julia.

So besides all she took in at her performances, she'd get a lot more by visiting the miners' diggin's' And my! this was considered a great honor, to be seen in the company of Julia Dean. Naturally she'd get proposals by the hundred. Why, when she played at Salt Lake, even Brigham Young wanted to marry her, but she told him, "No, Mr. Young," she says, "I'll have a whole man or none at all." Yes, she was wise, and they were fools.

Well, it was great times all right when Julia Dean come to town, but for wild excitement and real hair-raising they was nothing could match the bull-and-bear fights. They'd have them of a Sunday at the little plaza on the State Street back of Ham and Hildreth's livery stable, in the bull pen there.

Of course the men would bet on these fights, and thousands would go to see them; and when the bull and the bear would get to going good, goring and stamping and roaring and chawing and clawing and drawing blood, the people would get so excited that they'd bellow and roar louder than the animals. You could hear the men roaring clear across the flat, and the shrieks and screams of the Mexican women and the women of the town. My, oh, my, what times they was!

I only saw one bull-and-bear fight, in the fall of '56, and that was the last we had, for by then the people was getting sobered down from the first wild days; they wouldn't allow these fights because they was so hideous, you know. So after that the men had no more bull-and-bear fights to risk their money on, but they was still plenty of ways that they could try their luck. Yes, sir, I've heard they was 243 faro banks operating in this town at one time with a capital all together of close on to $2,000,000.

See that hole right across Main Street just cater-corner to where we're sitting? Well, sir, that's all that's left of the greatest gambling house in all the Southern Mines—the Long Tom. It was Teen Duchow and Jack White jumped the ground and mined it out after the place burnt, along about '67. This Jack White, he was one of the regular gamblers there, and he knew that the gambling business had got so poor by then that the Mitchell brothers, who owned the place, they wouldn't build again. So

they'd been nothing but a hole there ever since.

But along in the '50s, say, that was a place to see! It was a big hall that run along the south side of Jackson Street from Main clean through to Broadway, with a door at each end. They was a string of tables along each side and an aisle between, straight through the building—24 tables, two rows of them, 12 in a row, and a game going on at each one a good part of the time. In the evenings it was lighted by three big whale-oil lamps—bowls as big as a water bucket swung from the beams above the aisle, just higher than a man's head. They had wicks two inches thick and they made the place as bright as day.

To keep the house in order they had two doormen, one at each door, and two floormen inside, patrolling up and down the aisles. Anyone that come to the door the doorman would ask if he wanted to gamble or just to look on and see the sights. If he just wanted to see, it was, "All right, go ahead." But if he wanted to play, the doorkeeper would tell him, "Go over there to one of the floormen, and he'll show you to a table." So the fellow would go to a floorman and tell him what game he wanted and the floorman would find a place for him.

Of course, in them days pretty near all the fellows that gambled had guns in their belts, and these floormen carried a big gun on each hip. They was the judges to settle disputes. The gamblers, you know, they wouldn't tolerate cheating from nobody. The minute they discovered that a man was cheating, the game was going to end right there. If the dispute got hot, and it began to look like trouble, the floormen would pull out their guns and *bang* would go this light, and *bang* would go that light, and *bang* would go the other light, and the whole place would be dark.

At the same time the doormen would lock all the doors. Then the floormen would take dark lanterns that would just throw a beam like a flashlight—they would take one of these lanterns in one hand and a gun in the other and would go to the table where the dispute was and find out what the trouble was about. If anyone was cheating, they would inquire, "How much money did you take by this fraud? How much did you win on that hand?" Maybe it would be $50 or $100. "Well," they'd order him, "donate that money back to the men here that you took it from. Now if you people can go on peaceably with your game, all right; if not, leave the table and get out." But the fellow that was caught cheating always had to pay back before they'd let him go.

Then the floormen would rig up new lights and the games would go on as usual; and they *was* games, too. Often they'd be from $50,000 to $100,000 on the tables there at once, and nearly all in gold—eagles and double eagles and big $50 slugs, and sometimes raw gold dust.

The sharpest gambler there in the Long Tom was Lou Alverson; he was number one. Then they was this Jack White, and Ad Pence, and Doc Johns—he was a professional gambler and a comic—and then Charlie Karp, the fan-tan man, and John Milton Strain, the fellow that found the 30 pound nugget, and Gove'nor Hobbs. The last time I see the Gove'nor, poor devil, he was squirting sody water down at Oakdale, and he made me a milk shake. But they was still some

sporting blood in his veins, for he says to me, "I'll shake with you for the price of that drink, double or none!"

These fellows, you see, they run the games themselves; the house just rented the tables and sold the drinks and the cards. Now you take, for instance, if I was dealing a game of monte, and wasn't having good luck, I might blame it onto the cards, and I'd buy a new deck to change my luck, and cast-off cards would pile up on the floor so you was wading through them by midnight.

Then in the morning they'd sweep the place out and us little tikes would find two-and-a-half and five-dollar gold pieces, and silver, just scads of it, in the sweepings, because money that was dropped, they'd never stoop to pick it up. That was beneath their dignity, because gold was plentiful, you see. And sometimes a gambler would come to the door and stick his hand in his pocket, and without looking to see what he had—gold or silver or what—he'd fling a handful of it into the street to see the small boys scramble.

Now I'm going to tell you something that happened in the Long Tom that will show you what these fellows was like.

It was one day in the rainy winter of '54 and '55, and too wet to work in the mines, so the boys begun to wander in early down at the Long Tom. By noon all the tables was full and the gambling got more exciting as the day wore on, Some of the boys set right there at the tables from morning through all the day and on into the evening, without stopping except to take on a drink or to make room for more.

If you once get the gambling fever, you know, in a place like that, the longer you keep it, the higher the fever gets. That fever's catching and it'll spread through a crowd like any other fever. So monte, faro, seven-up, and the different brands of poker got too slow for some, and they begun laying bets on any chance that offered. At some of the tables they was betting on the turn of a card, and they was one crowd having a spitting tournament at the stove. Then they was some fellows betting which of two flies on the wall would move first, and others at the door laying bets whether or not the next man to come in would be Irish. But the greatest bet in betting history was laid that night by young Ad Pence. An inspiration it was, no less.

"Boys," says Ad, pounding on the bar to get the attention of the crowd, "Boys," says he, "luck's been agin me so far, but I've got five hundred here that says I've a louse that can beat in a fair race, any louse that ever cut his teeth on any miner's hide."

He'd caught a good lively one and held him up for all the boys to see. "I say this louse is the champeen," says Ad, "for I've been chasing him around my carcass for a week and I've only just caught up with him, Five hundred backs him against all comers."

Well, at that all the games stopped short, and everybody crowded up to the bar where Ad was showing off this champeen louse. But none of the boys would admit that he kept this kind of stock and it began to look as though nobody was going to take the bet. Then a stranger, a big Irishman with a red beard, come elbowing his way through the crowd and up to the bar where Ad was standing.

"Will ye let me have a look at that louse?" he says.

So Ad held it out and the stranger squinted at it from one side and then from the other. "A dainty crayther indade he is," says he, "but I think he's no racer. His belly's too low and his legs are too short by a long ways. Now wait just a bit and I'll have something to show ye."

So the stranger put his hand inside his shirt, and scrabbled around in there for a minute, and when he pulled it out again, between his thumb and finger he held up a struggling louse.

"Me boy," he says, "your five hundred is as good as gone. But before I take it from ye, I want ye to have a good look at *this* louse. Ye'll never see the likes of him again. Ye say yours is the champeen, but ye've only had him a wake, and he has not so much as a name. I say he's a mongrel. Now *this* one is the greatest racing louse in all the world, and he has the most distinguished pedigray that ever a louse did boast. And I don't want to be taking your money under any false pretense, so I'm going to tell ye his history, and when ye've heard it, if ye want to withdraw, I'll freely let you do so.

"Just before me old grandfather died, back in Ireland, he called me to his bedside and he said to me. 'Grandson,' says he, 'I'm a pore man. I've no money to lave ye, nor any property. But there's wan threasure I have, Grandson,' says the old man. 'Katie, the finest little seam squirrel in all of Ireland, and a direct discindent of one that fed on Saint Patrick.

" 'Take her, Grandson,' says he, 'kape good care of her and fade her well, and she'll surely bring ye luck.'

"Now, me boy, this louse ye see here is Larry, Katie's great-great-great-grandson, and the blood of Saint Patrick himself runs in his veins, so he's bound to bring me luck. And to show the faith I have in him and in the Holy Saint Patrick, bejayziz, I'll lay a thousand to that five hundred ye bet on yer mongrel louse! Now, do ye still want to make the bet?"

"I do," says Ad. "Your louse may be good, but I know what mine can do from long chasing of him, and my bet on him still stands."

So Ad and the stranger placed their stakes with Doc Johns, and side betting begun in the crowd.

"There can be no race without a racetrack," says the stranger, and he calls to the bartender. "Bring us a plate," he says. "Now, boys, the middle's the start, the edge is the goal, and the first little pants rabbit over the rim is the winner."

So the bartender brought a plate and the stranger felt of it. "No louse," says he, "would ever set a good pace on this cold plate. Let's hate it up a bit, and then you'll see them kick up their heels and run."

So they heated the plate piping hot over the stove and set it on a table where all could see. And when Doc Johns counted off, "One, two, three, go!" each man dropped his louse in the middle of the plate and they were off, a-scrambling and a-jumping because it was so hot, you know. The boys were cheering and yelling and standing on chairs to see, and laying bets right and left.

Well, neck and neck it was at the start acrost the bottom of the plate, but Ad's louse pulled ahead a bit and

he was the first to reach the rise of the rim. Then came the last hard pull for the edge. He started up the rise, but when he got about halfway up he lost his footing on the slippery rim and slid down again. So he backed up and he took another run for it, and got up a little farther, but again he slid back. He was a game one, that louse was. He tried it again and again, but he couldn't quite make it. No, sir, it was on that last hard pull up the rim of the plate that the blood of Saint Patrick begun to tell, for Larry, the stranger's lucky louse, he started up slow and careful, and he kept on a-pulling and a-scrambling and up and up he went and *over* the edge to victory and into his master's hand. A hero he was, for sure!

The fellows jumped down from the tables then and Jack White, he says, "Three cheers for Larry and the blood of Saint Patrick!" So the boys roared out the three cheers. And they *was* cheers too, for them young fellows didn't have no colds, nor consumption neither.

Well, then Doc Johns paid over the $1500 to the stranger, and Ad went up to shake his hand. "Stranger," he says, "it was a fair race, and the best louse won. The money's yours and I don't begrudge it to you. But I've one request to make of you, stranger, and if you'll grant it, I'll be forever grateful."

"And what may that be?" says the stranger.

"Just let me borrow Larry till tomorrow," says Ad.

"But what for?" says the stranger. "Why might ye be wanting to borrow me pet?"

"Why man!" says Ad, "I want to improve my breed!"

GUN-FIGHT WRINKLES

With their lives often depending on a fraction of a second's advantage in the draw, it was small wonder that gun fighters ceaselessly thought up new tricks and new rigs designed to secure that advantage for themselves. The famous Wes Hardin, for example, was responsible for a special gun-carrying vest. Two pockets on the garment were made to accommodate six-shooters, the butts pointing inward towards each other, a cross-draw being used.

One popular device, seen in various forms, was the holsterless gun belt. In one way or another, the gun was attached to the belt by a rivet about which it could swivel. The method of shooting was the same as that with the open-toed holster — the hand dropped to the butt, brought the barrel to horizontal, and let loose.

Some of the best of the old gun throwers apparently scorned anything as fancy as a holster. Wild Bill Hickok reputedly carried his two big Colts merely stuck in his waistband for a cross-draw. Others carried their guns in low, leather-lined pockets in their pants.

What was the best method? Well, one man's draw might be another man's suicide. To each gun fighter the way that best suited him was the only way, and the man who tried to change his technique might discover, somewhat tardily, that his old draw was better, after all.

Cibolero's Keepsake

By S. Omar Barker

WHEN THE ciboleros *ride out on what may well be the last buffalo hunt of the century, Johnny McMordy,* vaquero Americano, *rides with them to try this new sport. In his memory is a picture of roving-eyed Panchita Lopez, in his wallet a rosebud tossed from Panchita's slim hand, and on his mind the thought of the enmity wrought in* cibolero capitan *Pat Serrano by that simple little flower-tossing episode. This story is published here for the first time.*

JOHNNY McMORDY sat astraddle of his dun pony, watching the exchange of farewells in the adobe plaza with a grin wider than it was deep. For bold *ciboleros* setting out on what might well be a last buffalo hunt, it was taking Patricio and his *compadres* one hell of a long time to bust loose from their womenfolk. But it was not merely Johnny's Anglo-Saxon impatience with delay that robbed his grin of its unusual good-humored depth. It was the demure but tantalizing behavior of Panchita Lopez. Seeing Panchita, amid all the flirtatious coyness of the others, offer Patricio Serrano her cheek to kiss—in her parents' presence—gave Johnny McMordy what he called a gouge in the gizzard.

That was also what provoked the slightly malicious grin, for Johnny himself had done a little kissing last

night in the shadows of the Lopez *patio*—and it hadn't been any of this cheek stuff, either.

From the driver's seat on the lead wagon, Domingo Haynes spat brownly from a buoktoothed mouth lurking in the midst of cinnamon whiskers.

"If that ain't Mexkins fer yuh!" said Domingo, who was a half-breed himself and married to a brown Spanish woman. "What'd we hook up fer if we wasn't aimin' to start?"

"Maybe I better go light a fire under 'em," shrugged Johnny.

Tall and easy in the saddle, he rode to where several laughing *ciboleros* and *senoritas* had joined hands and were skip-dancing a circle around Panchita Lopez and Pat Serrano. The girls were pretty, black-eyed, willow-waisted, and full of sprouts. But not as warmly luscious as Panchita.

Now, with the handsomest of Las Vegas's young *caballeros* stomping an improvised version of *La Jota* around her, Panchita's slim back was arched, her small toes tapping, and her black eyes flashing with tantalizing merriment.

"Hey, Pat!" Johnny called out dryly. "Quit roosterin' around that little red hen an' let's travel!"

Patricio's flushed face showed good white teeth in a grin. "Go tweest a pig's tail, Juanito!" he retorted. "Here we make fon!"

But Johnny's interruption had served to stop the frolic. With a flick of her red skirt Panchita turned to bat her black eyes impudently at him, her little round chin at a high, sassy angle.

"*Pues!* I am a hen, eh, *Senor?*" she challenged. "What way is that for a gentleman to talk?"

"All right then—you ain't no hen," shrugged Johnny, his blue eyes bold. "You're pure sugar candy in a little red bucket! But if Pat's holdin' up this caravan in hopes of another smack, he'd better git at it or I'm liable to 'tend to it for him!"

"*Va!*" cried the girl, with a pretty toss of her dark head. "What beeg talk you make!"

"Talk, huh?" Johnny stepped down from his horse and started toward her.

Feminine giggles changed to squeals as Patricio Serrano stepped in front of him, his face flushed with quick Spanish anger. His black eyes lacked no more than half an inch of being on a level with Johnny McMordy's and there was a look in them that Johnny had never seen there before.

"No, Johnny!" Patricio's explosive exclamation was followed by a rigid Spanish formality that was definitely hostile. "The *Senorita* Lopez is my *novia, senor!* I will kill him who tries to kiss her!"

Johnny had associated freely with the Spanish people of this frontier town for the past four years—yet now he was surprised. For a jiffy he wasn't sure whether he was going to laugh or fight—and wound up by doing neither. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Panchita's parents swoop in like a pair of hawks and hustle her away.

"Don't git your tail over the lines, Pat," he drawled, like velvet lined with rawhide. "A little hoorawin' ain't goin' to hurt nobody."

"A joke—that's all right, but—"

"You don't think I was aimin' to buss your *bonita* if she didn't want to let me, do you?"

"No, Juanito, but—"

"Well, you don't figger she's the kind that'd stand for a straw-haired *gringo* smackin' her right out in the public plaza, do you?"

"No, *por dios!* But—"

"*Bueno!* Let's forgit it, an' go buffalo huntin' before the wheels rot off these wagons!"

Patricio Serrano shrugged. He strode to where a wide-eyed *chico*, too busy watching the goings-on to wipe his nose, was holding a drowsing pinto horse. Pat swung into the silver-trimmed, dish-horned saddle with the ease and grace of a cougar topping a windfall. A touch of spike-rowled spurs, a tight rein, and the slap of a quirt on fringed leather breeches quickly made a rearing, prancing charger out of the drowsy pinto. Pat waved his quirt aloft.

"*Vamos, ciboleros!*" he shouted.

"*Ciboler-r-ros!*" echoed the long-drawn, high-pitched yell from the Spanish throats of six other leather-trousered *bravos* as they hit their saddles.

Eastward down adobe-lined Bridge Street rolled the four deep-bedded, creaking wagons—mostly patched up cast-offs of the freight trail to Santa Fe—drawn by three- and four-span teams of mixed mules and horses.

Jaunty on the driver's seat of the lead wagon, scrawny old Domingo Haynes flung his whisky tenor on the air in a lusty song of the Mexican buffalo hunters. Above the clatter of hoof and wagon the others took it up:

"*Ciboleros Mejicanos,*
Ya nos vamos pa' los llanos!
Pa' matar alla en La Ceja
*Carne gorda pa' la vieja!**
Cibolero! Cibolero! CIBO-LER-R-R-O!"

---

*"Mexican buffalo hunters,
Here we go to the plains,
To kill, out there on the Caprock,
Fat meat for the old woman!"

Sole *gringo* in the party, Johnny McMordy couldn't help feeling a little silly to be taking part in all this gala *fanfarron*. From Domingo Haynes he had heard tall tales of the great hunts of only a few years ago when Plains and Caprock were still black with buffalo herds, numbering thousands upon thousands. Now, in 1880, the big herds had vanished, cut down chiefly by the Sharps rifles of hundreds of hide hunters coming on them from the east. Only a few scattered remnants, hidden out in isolated coves and canyons, were said to remain. It was almost unbelievable that in less than a score of years this could have happened. The last meat hunt from Las Vegas had returned in '77 with the dried *charqui* of less than a dozen buffalo. So the *ciboleros* of the New Mexican villages had put aside their lances and rifles and gone forth to run buffalo no more.

But early this autumn rumors had reached Las Vegas that a remnant herd, numbering anywhere from 50 to 200 or 300, had been sighted in a deep, inaccessible canyon bowl called *Rincon del Ojo Verde* (Cove of the Green Spring) in the *La Ceja* or Caprock country. How much truth there might be in the rumor nobody knew. Some veteran *ciboleros* shook grizzled heads and said they'd never heard of any place called *Rincon del Ojo Verde;* and anyway it was well known that the buffalo were all gone.

Old Domingo Haynes, however, had batted his amber, coyote-like eye-and-a-half and claimed that he not only knew where the *Ojo Verde* was, but could well believe there might still be buffalo there. Furthermore, he wouldn't mind driving a wagon on just one more buffalo hunt, if only to

give his "fat Mexkin wife a chance to sweat off a little lard chopping wood enduring his absence."

So a bunch of inexperienced young *Mejicanos* with a whim for adventure had drummed up a buffalo hunt. And Johnny McMordy, a young *vaquero Americano* recently fired by the Flying V Ranch for refusing to shoot wild horses, had taken a free-lance notion to go along.

In the four years since he had drifted into the Las Vegas country from Arizona at the age of 18, Johnny had punched cattle, peeled broncs, drunk some whisky, and kissed a few gals, but he had never shot or lanced a buffalo nor ridden in any such plaza parade as this. Two abreast, the horsebackers pranced their ponies once more around the plaza before following the wagons. Johnny found himself riding beside Patricio Serrano, both of them "cuttin' 'er loose" with the catchy *cibolero* song as if nothing had happened between them.

How she had managed to escape her parents to get there Johnny could not surmise, but in view of her successful evasion of chaperons to meet him in the *patio* the night before, the cowboy was not surprised now to see Panchita Lopez with a bevy of *senoritas* on the low roof of her father's store, waving dainty kerchiefs at the passing *ciboleros*.

As he and Patricio came abreast of her, Panchita pressed a red rosebud to her lips and tossed it. The token could have been meant for either of them, but it was Johnny McMordy who caught it. In the elaborate manner of a genuine Spanish *caballero*, the *gringo* cowboy pressed the rose to his lips and lifted his black *sombrero* high in acknowledgment. But already Panchita had vanished.

With a good wide grin, Johnny fished out his buckskin-laced wallet and deposited the rose in it. "Looks like I got me a little keepsake, don't it, Pat?" he said with a wink.

The lip line below Pat Serrano's neat black mustache thinned visibly, but he said nothing. It was not until the caravan was well out on the mesa that he opened up. Johnny was riding alongside the lead wagon, swapping lies with Domingo Haynes when Pat spurred up abreast of them.

"*Senor* McMordy," he said in stiff, stilted Spanish, "may I call to your attention the well known fact that a gentleman does not retain that which does not belong to him?"

"Hell's a whizzer, Pat!" broke in Domingo Haynes. "What's all this '*Senor* McMordy' stuff? You fergot this jasper's callin' name is 'Johnny'?"

"I was not addressing you, *viejo*," said Pat sharply. He extended a cupped palm toward Johnny. "Give it to me!"

Johnny's grin was not hostile, but he shook his head.

"What the hell you done, Johnny?" inquired Domingo. "Stole this pore boy's silver snuff box?"

"Nope," shrugged Johnny. "What I've got ain't of no value to me if it's his, nor no value to him if it's mine. Just the same, I aim to keep it. You want me to tell Domingo an' the rest of the boys what it is, Pat?"

"No, *por dios!*" exclaimed Patricio sharply.

"Then," grinned Johnny, "you an' me—we got us a secret, ain't we?" But if Johnny figured he could josh Pat into a good humor, he certainly missed his turkey.

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From across the wagon, sallow, chinless Jose Montoya rose in his stirrups to toss in his two-cents' worth. "*Vaya*, Patricio!" His smile was close kin to a sneer. "I saw the little witch's lips speak a name when she tossed it. I can tell you for whom it was intended if you want to know!"

Johnny was about to advise the chinless Jose to keep his buzzard's beak out of it, but Patricio beat him to it.

"Is this a business of yours, Jose?" Pat then turned to the cowboy, once more stiffly formal. "*Senor* McMordy, perhaps you forget that I am the *capitan* of this excursion, and you an invited guest."

"No such of a damn thing," interposed Domingo Haynes dryly. "I'm *caporal* of the wagons, an' Johnny's my duly app'inted wheel guard. Ain't you, Johnny?"

The cowboy didn't answer that. Patricio was close abreast of him now, half turned in his saddle so that they rode eye to eye.

"Get this straight, Pat," said Johnny soberly. "If I ain't welcome here, I'll turn back." He reined up his horse as if he aimed to do so, and the symptom of a grin broke through his leathery soberness. "Any message you'd like to send back to Panchita?"

Johnny wanted to laugh at the look of consternation on Patricio's face, but he held it in. It was not hard to guess why the alleged fiance of roving-eyed Panchita Lopez should be alarmed at the prospect of leaving equally roving-eyed Johnny McMordy footloose in Las Vegas during his own absence on a buffalo hunt.

Nevertheless, Pat managed to assume an appearance of indifference.

"It may be, *Senor* McMordy, that you fear you are not man enough to lance a buffalo—" He broke off with an expressive shrug.

Jose Montoya laughed his unpleasant laugh. "Make it a bet," he suggested with a sly smirk. "The man who first downs a buffalo with his lance, to him belongs the rose of Panchita Lopez!"

This time Johnny's grin was as deep as it was wide. "Hell, that suits me like buckin' suits a bronco," he said. "How about it, Pat?"

Patricio's lips stayed tight and smileless. "The rose was meant for me, *Senor* McMordy!"

"Don't be too damn sure about that, Pat," said Johnny dryly. "Anyhow, I've got it—but I'm offerin' you a sportin' proposition. O' course, if you're skeered you ain't man enough to beat me to lancin' a buffalo—"

Pat's prideful Spanish blood could not resist such a challenge. "*Hecho!*" he cried, quirting his leather pants and making his pony prance. "The bet is made! For the rose of Panchita Lopez I will lance a dozen buffalo! A hundred! A thousand! A—"

"One'll be enough," broke in Johnny dryly, "if you down him first. Otherwise I'm aimin' to take Panchita's posy back to her when we git home an' claim two hugs an' a kiss for every petal!"

If Patricio heard this last, he preferred to pretend otherwise. With a typical Spanish rearing start, he loped off to join Agapito and Adan, who had ridden on ahead and were amusing themselves (and tiring their ponies) chasing a coyote. Johnny and Jose Montoya did not join them. Jose laughed his oddly unhumorous laugh, batted his shifty eyes at Johnny, and pointed with what little chin he had in the direction of Pat Serrano.

"*Zzzt!*" he said, drawing a long forefinger like a knife across his throat.

Johnny didn't bother to ask him what he meant.

The wagons justled down Corazon Hill to Conchas Creek, down the Conchas to the clear, shallow waters of the Canadian, bordered in those days by a lush growth of wild grapes, plum thickets, and chokecherries. Coursed by the meandering south bank, they followed the old trail of the Comancheros, heading out toward *El Llano Estacado* (Staked Plains) and *La Ceja* beyond.

In camp each night young Adan Pacheco and old Jesus Maria Aragon, one of the teamsters, broke out their guitar and fiddle, and the coyotes' howling was answered by many a song born in faraway Spain. Old Jesus and Domingo told tales of the hunts in their young *cibolero* days, when the plains had been black with the "big-humps" and there were still wild Comanches to dodge, fight, or trade with, as suited the red man's whim.

There were ribald jokes and swaggerish male talk of love and women, too, but the name of Panchita Lopez was not again mentioned. For the most part Johnny McMordy listened and said little. Between him and Pat Serrano there seemed to have risen an invisible wall of silent hostility. Johnny tried once or twice to break through it with a bit of joking, but the only response he met was an elaborate Spanish politeness with the frost of enmity on it. After a dose or two of it, Johnny began to act a little frosty himself.

"You an' Pat," old Domingo Haynes told him one day, "put me in mind of a coupla pups stiff-leggin' it around, waitin' fer somebody to holler sic 'em!"

On the other hand, Jose Montoya, despite Johnny's efforts to avoid him, seemed determined to make himself the cowboy's bosom *compadre*.

"Don't worry, Juanito," Jose would smirk every time he could maneuver the cowboy out of earshot of the others. "It is true that I saw you alone with Panchita that night in the *patio*, but I have not told Patricio. Because if he knew—*zzzt!*" Again that knife-slash drawing of his forefinger across his throat.

To these unsought reassurances Johnny made no reply.

Down the Canadian they made camp one late afternoon not far from the lone dugout of a squatter from Arkansas, with more family than he had shoes to put their feet in. Returning home from gathering wild grapes, the squatter's 19-year-old daughter, with a younger brother and sister, came unexpectedly upon the *ciboleros'* camp. Shy as a wild deer, the girl had started to circle wide around it when the *ciboleros* spied her.

"*Por dios!*" exclaimed Patricio with a white-toothed smile that may have been slightly mocking. "A barefoot nymph of the *chaparral!* What do you say, *compadres?* Shall we invite her to supper?" He raised his voice, calling out in Spanish, "*Hola, princesita! Ven a cenar!*"

At the call, in a language strange to her ears, the girl quickened her step, the two youngsters close at her heels. Even in her too-big man's coat and butternut-brown jeans, Johnny could not help noting with what slender, lithe grace her body moved.

Pat suddenly set aside his *chili con carne* and started at a fast walk as if to head her off. Johnny got up with an air of complete casualness and started after him.

Squatting against a wheel, Jose Montoya set down his plate and rested his right hand on the holt of his brand new six-shooter.

Without making a show of it, old Domingo Haynes shifted himself around between Jose and the two men striding out across the flat. "Fixin' to use that new six-bang fer a spoon, Jose?" he inquired softly.

Johnny's long reach caught Patricio's arm. "Let her be, Pat," he said quietly. "Cain't you see she's as skeered as a rabbit?"

"What business of yours, *Senor* McMordy?" Pat jerked his arm free without turning.

The girl was no longer running away. She set down her pail of wild grapes and faced them, the wild-eyed children clinging close at her side, almost like some frightened wild creature brought to bay. From inside her coat she drew a big, long-barreled, single-shot pistol, which she pointed at Patricio Serrano with shaking hands.

"*Que barbara!*" exclaimed Pat. He took one more tentative step toward her, only to find Johnny's long back blocking his way.

"You don't need to fear no harm, miss," said Johnny.

For a moment the girl's big blue eyes met his, the fright still in them. Then slowly she stowed away the big pistol, picked up her bucket, herded the two children ahead of her, and hurried on up the draw toward the dugout without speaking a word.

"Pore little wildy," said Johnny. "Them kind ain't used to *guapos* like you prancin' around, Pat."

"Some day, *Senor* McMordy," said Pat, stiff as frozen rawhide, "you will step across my path one time too often!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," shrugged the cowboy.

Back at the wagons, Pat's fellow *ciboleros* appraised the state of his Spanish temper and kept their mouths discreetly shut. But the first time Jose Montoya could catch Johnny McMordy's eye, furtively he again drew his finger across his throat.

Rolling across the Staked Plains, they met up with a trail herd of longhorn cattle, but they spied no buffalo nor fresh signs of them—only the bleaching skulls and bones left by hide hunters, and occasional wallows already beginning to grow up with grass. Yet the spirit of expectation ran high. The young *caballeros* got their lances out of the wagons and spent hours running their horses at and spearing imaginary buffalo. These lances were stout, smooth poles six to seven feet long, tipped by spear points made of old bayonet blades or rasps ground to a razor edge. To the other end was attached a rawhide loop to hook over the saddle horn and make sure of pulling the lance out of the buffalo after it had been hurled.

Most of the *ciboleros* carried pistols of one sort or another, and in the wagons there was a supply of long guns, ranging from old silver-embossed Spanish muskets to ponderous .50-caliber Sharps rifles. These would be used as needed to round out their load of meat, but first the young *bravos* aimed to enjoy the somewhat perilous sport of lancing.

The wagons circled the eastern Caprock, riders scattering down into canyon heads and coves in search of sign. Finally, one midafternoon, old Domingo Haynes raised the raucous yell: "*Cibola!*" All he had seen was fresh tracks and dung, but that was enough. Signal shots soon brought all riders back to the wagons.

Old Domingo's arm drew a big S in the air out toward the brushy, broken country below the Caprock.

"*Rincon del Ojo Verde* lies yonder," he said. "We got to circle a few miles farther to git down to camp water—but there's some right big open flats shut in by yon ridges—an' that's where we'll find 'em, early in the mornin'."

Toward dusk, as they worked the wagons down off the Caprock, they came onto a gaunt old bull buffalo alone in a small *rincon*. The moth-eaten creature made only a feeble effort to run away. Plainly he was an aged cripple, already just about at the end of his trail.

Nevertheless, Jose Montoya and two other *ciboleros* raced to the wagon for their lances.

"*No, chivos!*" commanded Pat Serrano sharply. "Is it the sport of men to lance a *cibol* already half dead?"

Shamefaced, Hilario and Onofre put their lances back in the rack. Defiantly, Jose Montoya kept his, but made no move to ride toward the buffalo.

Pat's eyes met Johnny McMordy's coldly across the wagon. He waved toward the crippled bull. "*Mira, Senor* McMordy!" he said in a tone tinged with contemptuous challenge. "If you wish to be the first to lance a *cibolo*, there is your chance!"

"I yield to our brave *capitan*," said Johnny sarcastically.

The wagons jolted on. Somewhere within the next half mile Johnny noted that Jose Montoya was missing, and presently they all heard a shot. Jose rode in while they were making camp, with blood on his lance and a smirk on his face.

"*Por dios, Capitan* Patricio!" he boasted. "I am the first to lance a buffalo! Do I get the rose of Panchita Lopez?"

Pat gave him a contemptuous look and said nothing.

"You wasn't in the bet, fish-face," said Domingo Haynes caustically. "Besides, you never lanced no live buffalo. You shot him an' stuck your sticker in him after he was down to git it bloody. If I was *capitan* of this outfit, I'd—"

"Jose," broke in Patricio coldly, "it is lucky for you that I do not kick dogs. I am *capitan* here. When we run the buffalo in the morning you, my braggart bull killer, will not ride with us!"

"*Bien dicho*, Pat," said Johnny McMordy. "That's layin' it on the taw line."

"Is it a business of yours, *Senor* McMordy?" inquired Pat coldly.

Old Domingo Haynes had known what he was talking about. A presunup scout discovered a herd of perhaps 200 buffalo grazing on a wide grassy flat about a mile from the *Ciboleros*' camp. Johnny could not help admiring the businesslike manner in which Patricio ordered the hunt so that no eager *cibolero* might have advantage over his fellows in this first run with lances. With the wind in the hunter's favor, even the four or five out-ranging sentinels of the herd had not detected their presence when

Patricio lined up with his hopeful young *Ciboleros*, not including Jose Montoya, in a ravine about a quarter of a mile from the herd of humpbacks darkening the grassy flat.

"*Listos?*" Pat raised high his lance, to signal the start. "*Cibola!*"

In the scramble up the steep slope out of the ravine one hunter's horse fell, but Johnny, Pat, and the rest topped out together onto the flat, racing neck and neck. Once such a herd of buffalo might have been confused and slow getting started, but the recent years of almost constant flight from hunters had taught even these big, stupid-acting brutes their lesson. At first glimpse of the approaching horsemen, with a swift, jerky flicking of tails, cows, bulls, calves, and all broke almost instantly into a lurching, lumbering stampede westward toward the rougher hills under the Caprock.

Yet so sudden was the attack that almost before he realized it Johnny's swift dun pony was racing at the herd's left flank. It was the first time the cow pony had ever seen a buffalo, but a light touch of reins and pressure of knees were all he needed. As he surged up at the left of a fat young cow, Johnny dropped the tied reins to the saddle-horn and poised his lance back over his shoulder in the hard grip of both hands.

Out of the tail of his eye he saw Pat Serrano gaining a similar position alongside a huge black bull. For perhaps the tenth of a second Johnny hesitated, his muscles balked by the strange thought that probably Panchita had really meant the rose for Pat after all—despite those kisses in the *patio*.

Johnny felt the strong, sure surge of the dun's muscles under him, holding him steadily in position alongside the running buffalo cow. With a tense lumping of hard arm muscles, he stood high in the stirrups and plunged the lance deep through her black hide just back of the left shoulder.

The tug of the rawhide loop on his saddlehorn almost jerked his pony down, but the deep-thrust lance came free. As he caught it up, Johnny saw the sleek cow sprawl headlong and lie still but for a few quivering muscles.

He reined up to look around just in time to see Pat Serrano sink his lance deep and true between the ribs of his bull. Yonder he saw Adan Pacheco having trouble recovering his lance from an obstreperous yearling that refused to fall, and farther away, Agapito poised for the thrust. Already it was apparent that there would be meat in the wagons when they rolled once more into the Oldtown Plaza.

Eagerly Johnny's pony stretched his neck to race on after the fleeing buffalo, but Johnny reined him in. He had craved the experience of lancing a buffalo—and there was no denying that it had been sport. But he had no desire to lance another. Doubtless Patricio and the boys—even old Domingo Haynes—would look with contempt upon any such softness inside a man; but the truth was that the sight of these big, dumb, frightened creatures fleeing helplessly for their lives had struck Johnny as a pitiful spectacle. The idea of taking further part in the destruction of what might well be the last remnant of a species gave him a feeling of revulsion.

A few weeks before, a hard-boiled range boss on the Flying V had fired him for refusing to shoot down wild

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mustangs. So he had turned *cibolero* for the adventure of it—only to discover that he had little relish for slaughtering buffalo, either.

Yet meat was meat, and that was what the wagons had come after. Once reduced to pot or pan, or dried into jerky, Johnny knew he would relish buffalo beef as much as the next one.

Johnny was stooping over the dead cow to bleed her when he heard a shot. Something like the touch of a light breeze knocked his hat off. Johnny reached to pick it up and saw a bullet hole through the crown. With the quick instinct of his breed, his right hand flashed to his six-shooter. He crouched low beside the dead buffalo, his eyes searching the direction from which the shot had seemed to come. But between him and the meandering lip of a deep arroyo 200 yards away lay only an open, empty flat.

Suddenly another shot rang out. Johnny whirled around to see Patricio zigzagging swiftly toward him on foot, his six-gun still smoking. For a shocked instant the cowboy drew bead on Pat's wishbone, aiming to defend himself from this unbelievable, unprovoked attack. Suddenly Pat threw himself flat on the ground and another shot rang out—this time the unmistakable bang of a heavy rifle, apparently fired over the lip of the arroyo.

Johnny saw Pat fire twice as he got up. He realized now, with relief, that the Mexican was not shooting at him, but answering the fire of somebody hidden in the arroyo, doubtless the same somebody who had put that bullet through Johnny's hat.

"Hey, Pat!" he called out softly. "Who is it? What's up?"

"Is it a business of yours, *Senor* McMordy?" came back the *cibolero capitan's* curt reply. "Get down behind that buffalo and stay there!"

"You better crawl over here quick yourownself, you danged idjit!" snorted Johnny. "Before you git—"

The air-smack of another rifle shot interrupted him. This time Johnny saw its smoke puff over the lip of the arroyo. And this time the shot was not a miss. It dropped Johnny's pony in his tracks. For a numb half second Johnny stared at the kicking horse. Then, reckless of the risk, he leaped to his feet and ran as fast as his long legs would carry him toward the arroyo.

But he could see nothing to shoot at, nor were there any more shots from the arroyo. He heard Pat shout an urgent warning: *Por dios*, Juanito! Down! You will be killed!" But he did not heed it. He could hear Pat pounding up swiftly behind him, but he was not prepared for the sudden flying tackle that threw him flat, knocking the wind clean out of him.

"I told you to get down, Johnny!" Patricio panted. "You crazee *gringo* —don't you know somebody is shooting at *you?*"

Johnny's aching lungs could not suck in enough wind either to answer or to get up immediately. When he did get up a moment later, Pat had already reached the lip of the arroyo. He ran a few yards around a sharp bend in it, then stopped.

When Jonny got to him, Pat made a pointing gesture with his chin. Down in the arroyo's damp, reddish bottom were tracks that showed plainly where a man had hurriedly mounted a horse and ridden away at a gallop down the gully, safely hidden

by its 20-foot banks and its many sharp curves. Johnny realized that afoot there would be no chance to overtake him.

"The sneakin' coyote!" said Johnny. "Who you reckon it was, Pat?"

"I have heard the old ones say," said Patricio with a shrug, "that they have sometimes been shot at by *Americano* hide hunters who do not like that we Mexicans run the buffalo when they want to sneak up close to shoot them." But his tone did not sound convincing.

"I will get my horse and trail him down," he said quietly. "Then I will kill him."

Johnny said nothing. It was in his mind that he would borrow Pat's horse, whether Pat liked it or not, and do the trailing himself. But as it turned out, they were both afoot. Agapito, Adan, Onofre, and the rest had raced on after the herd, hot to lance more buffalo, and Pat's loose horse had followed them.

Pat swore with a flourish, in both English and Spanish. Looking at his dead pony, Johnny could not even grin.

"I'm goin' to take a *pasear* down the arroyo, Pat," he said and did not protest when Patricio came with him.

They had followed the arroyo bank hardly half a mile when off to the west they saw two of their own wagons top out onto the flat, doubtless coming to skin out and take care of whatever buffalo the lancers may have downed. From the wagons two riders came toward them at a lope.

They waited. One rider was Jose Montoya on a sweat-lathered horse, the other Domingo Haynes on a mule. Jose swung to the ground, apparently considerably excited, but it was Domingo Haynes who spoke first.

"Jose was out lookin' fer a couple strayed mules, Pat," he said. "Claims he run into two *Americanos* scoutin' fer a party of hide hunters. Says they claimed they'd done spotted these buffalo first, an' was only waitin' for their main party to come up. Warned him that if we run these buffalo an' scattered 'em before they got here, they'd shoot the hell out of us! Hey, how come you fellers afoot?"

"Pat's horse run off with the herd," said Johnny. "Some lowdown son dry-gulched mine from the arroyo. Whichaway did them hide hunters go, Jose?"

Jose swung his arm widely southward where the arroyo lost itself in a deeper ravine. "I saw them drop off into this arroyo, Juanito! It must be one of them that shot your horse!"

Patricio had been looking at Jose's boots, and at the hoofs of his horse. "You lie, Jose Montoya!" he said quietly. "There is still the red earth of the arroyo on your own boots!"

With snake-like speed Jose whipped his pistol free from its holster. Without time even to think what he was—doing, Johnny stepped swiftly between the snout of Jose's gun and Pat Serrano—just in time for Jose's bullet to tear through the leather of his own gun holster, and thus deflected, miss Patricio. But the holster was already empty when the bullet got there, and one shot was all Jose ever had time to fire. As Johnny's slug caught him in the chest, he yelled a curse, tottered a moment, then slumped to the ground.

"I reckon somebody had to do it, Pat," said Johnny soberly. "I'm sorry it had to be me."

Patricio said nothing, but Jose Montoya somehow mustered enough

strength for one final bit of malevolence before he died.

"You are a fool, Juanito," he gasped. "Patricio offered me one hundred dollars to kill you—because—because of Panchita Lopez—just—like you offered me fifty to—kill him!"

Pat Serrano looked down at the sallow, ill-formed face of Jose Montoya, now more sallow than ever in death, then soberly, with distressed but level gaze, at Johnny McMordy. "I am ashamed for Jose, Johnny," he said. "Both times—he lied!"

"I knowed the booger had a hanker for Panchita hisownself," said Domingo Haynes. "But I never figgered it was that bad."

"Men who are men," said Patricio with simple Spanish dignity, "do not allow desire for a woman to make dogs of them. Johnny, your buffalo was down before mine. You have won the right to return Panchita's rose to her. If you can persuade her that it was meant for you—" He shrugged and spread his slim hands expressively, then turned sharply on his heel. "*Vamos, compadres!*" he called to the men on the approaching wagons. "You have here a dog to bury—and yonder are buffalo to be skinned! To the work, *hombrotes!*"

The rest of that day Johnny McMordy helped the older men skin buffalos, cut up the meat, and hang it up to dry on wagon bows and willow-pole racks they had brought along, while Patricio and the rest of the young bucks continued to harry the scattered herd, lancing half a dozen more and shooting several. In proof of the falsity of Jose Montoya's story, no party of hide hunters showed up to interfere with them.

The next morning Johnny refused Pat's offer to lend him his buffalo horse if he wanted to follow up and lance another buffalo. "Thanks, Pat—but I reckon it's a little too rich for my blood!"

The rest of the *ciboleros* had taken their *capitan's* report of the killing of Jose Montoya without much comment, except that Johnny thought Onofre and Hilario acted a little hostile toward him. That second day the hunters lanced and shot enough buffalo, Johnny figured, almost to fill their wagons.

In camp that evening, with a strange inward distress, he listened to their plans to run buffalo again tomorrow. Finally he spoke up. "Hell, Pat," he said, "ain't we got enough?"

"Enough *carne*, yes!" broke in Onofre. "But enough sport, no!"

"Hell," said Johnny quietly, "these may be the last buffalo left in the whole damn country!"

"I am *capitan* here," said Patricio in a tone of sharp authority. "We have killed enough. When the meat is dry enough we will start for home!"

As the loaded wagons rolled westward back across the *Llano*, off into the broken country and once more up the winding bank of the Canadian, most of the young *ciboleros* indulged their high spirits by chasing jackrabbits, coyotes, even antelope, sometimes trying to rope them, sometimes flinging lances at them. But Johnny could not help noticing that Pat Serrano took no part in their frolic.

The nearer they creaked to Las Vegas, the more often Johnny noted a faraway, troubled look in the young *cibolero* captain's dark eyes. It gave the cowboy an uncomfortable feeling

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to realize that he probably knew the reason. Yet to him there kept recurring a warm rememberance of the softness of a Spanish girl's lips pressed to his in the shadows of a Las Vegas *patio*—a black-eyed, willow-slim girl not easy to forget.

They passed the squatter's dugout on the Canadian in mid-morning with no more than a casual arm lifted in greeting to those of the squatter's family who came out to watch them pass. But Johnny saw that the slender girl who had been so scared of Patricio was among them.

He canceled out an impulse to suggest offering the family a gift of buffalo meat. If the old man wasn't at home, like as not those spooky women would meet a man at the door with the muzzle of a shotgun, anyhow.

Up Corazon Hill the teams slowly tugged, but once atop the mesa, even the mules began to prick up their ears, for yonder, smoky in the distance, lay Las Vegas.

On the morning of the last camp all the young bucks shaved and slicked up—not enough to hide the fact that they were now weathered *ciboleros*. Just enough to appear pleasing to the hero-worshiping *senoritas* who would doubtless be gathered in the plaza to greet them.

"Hell, I got to leave my whiskers on," grinned old Domingo Haynes, "so my ol' woman won't chaw me up fer buffalo meat! By galoofies, I hope she's got the winter wood chopped!"

Half a mile out of that last camp Johnny McMordy rode up alongside Pat Serrano, riding silent at the front wheel of the lead wagon.

Domingo Haynes cracked his long whip sportively within inches of Johnny's ear. "Yonder she smokes, boys!" he chuckled. "Whyn't you rivalrous Romeos make a race of it?"

Johnny grinned and thumbed his nose at him, then dropped in casually alongside Pat Serrano. He had his wallet open in his hand. He took from it a badly crushed, somewhat grimy, but still slightly fragrant object that had been a red rosebud.

"Before I forgit it, Pat," he grinned, "here's somethin' that belongs to you!"

Pat stared at him, making no move to take it. "But *por dios*, Johnny!" he began to protest. "I thought—"

Johnny seized one of Pat's hands and forcibly—though not against very great resistance—pressed the rose into its palm and closed the fingers.

"Hell, no!" laughed Johnny. "I got a little chore to look after back yonder on the Canadian. An' don't peck her on the cheek this time like a *primo!* Lips or nothing—you savvy! I'll return your hoss next spring!"

With a Spanish-like flourish, one arm waved high in farewell, Johnny McMordy whirled the spare pony Patricio had loaned him and rode off at a lope, back toward Corazon Hill.

Thus it was that when Patricio Serrano, young and handsome *capitan de ciboleros*, led his laden wagon train into the cheering plaza on his prancing pinto, two *ciboleros* who had set out with him were missing.

East of the Mesa, heading back down Corazon Hill, Johnny McMordy found himself wondering whether the blue-eyed squatter's daughter down on the Canadian was really as much of a wildy as she had seemed—or if, perhaps, she could be tamed.

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

Monkey See, Monkey Do

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THE TOWN of Apache has its collective confidence pretty badly shaken when Pegleg Pillpoot's trained sharp-shooting simian starts his match against Justin O. Smith, the Paintin' Pistoleer, with a bull's-eye. Things go from bad to worse when the miners' payroll is hijacked, and before they get straightened out, Apache has had itself quite a day. This story has not been published before.

PEGLEG PILLPOOT was shrewd, all right, when he brought his sharpshooting monkey to Apache on the very day when the town was crowded with jackleg miners from the Bonanza Syndicate diggings, come to collect their month's pay and spend it. They rose to the bait fast when Pillpoot offered a $1,000 prize to any man who could beat this monkey, Jub-Jub, in a shooting match, with no strings attached.

Now the miners knew something Pillpoot didn't know—that the champeen pistol shot of all Arizona lived right here in 'Pache; the young artist feller named Justin Other Smith, better known hereabouts as that Paintin' Pistoleer.

With the miners placing wagers on Smith, who couldn't lose if he tried, and Pillpoot coppering all those bets because he said Jub-Jub was unbeatable—well, there you have your immovable object meeting your irresistible force. Something's got to give. As it turned out, it cost Apache some bloodshed and near bankruptcy before the thing was over, and a murder mystery to boot.

The syndicate's paymaster, Jake Grubb, always paid off the muckers in Apache, because he claimed it was too risky to ride back into the Sacatone foothills with such a fat payroll. So the custom was for Grubb to ride over from Tucson on the Wells-Fargo stage, and pay off the boys on the front porch of Sol Fishman's O.K. Mercantile store.

No doubt Pegleg Pillpoot and his shooting monkey had an eye on the profit angle by timing their arrival to jibe with payday, when $100 bills was thicker than corkscrews at a camp meetin'. On this particular afternoon, the miners showed up from the diggings around two o'clock, aiming to use their credit at the O.K. Mercantile and the Bloated Goat Saloon and the other places in town, which meant the bartenders and barbers and gamblers would glom onto the Bonanza payroll even before it got to Apache.

Sheriff Rimfire Cudd was making the rounds of the main street in the interests of law and order, because these mischief-making miners had a habit of tipping over backhouses and shooting out window lights and putting burrs under the saddles of cowponies hitched at the racks, and all that kind of devilment.

That was why, in all the payday excitement, Rimfire didn't notice the long red tent that was being pitched in the alley between Lew Pirtle's telegraph office and the Longhorn Saddle Shop. The tent was up and a freckle-faced button about 13 was rigging up a big canvas sign over the front before the sheriff finally sashayed over to the alley for a looksee.

This sign was a gaudy affair, all faded and crinkly from being rolled and unrolled so often. It looked like a circus sideshow poster, and showed a picture of a red-haired chimpanzee holding a pair of six-shooters with flame spittin' out of the bores. This monkey was wearing a John B. hat and had a ca'tridge belt strapped around his belly.

Big gold letters over the sign said SHOOTING GALLERY — PEGLEG PILLPOOT & SON, MANAGERS. And underneath this picture of the gun-slinging monkey was bright red printing that said: $1,000 REWARD TO ANY SHARPSHOOTER WHO CAN BEAT THE SCORE OF JUB-JUB, THE WORLD'S ONLY MONKEY MARKSMAN!

Well now, that was too much for Sheriff Rimfire Cudd to swaller without chawing; so he takes a pasear over to where this kid is tying a guy-rope to a tent peg and braces him.

"You mean to stand there with your bare face hangin' out and tell me you got a monkey who can shoot guns like a human?"

"That's the gospel truth, Sheriff," the kid says, ogling Cudd's platter-sized star. "My dad's inside feedin' Jub-Jub now. Go on in. Dad's blind as a bat, but he'll be glad to see you, Sheriff," the kid says.

So Rimfire Cudd toes inside the red tent, his eyes popping like a tromped-on frog's, the way they allus do when he figgers somebody's hoorawing him. He sees a counter loaded with .22 rifles, at the far end of the tent, with planks set up as a backstop to catch bullets, and targets hanging from nails in the planks—clay pipes and pigeons and bright little tinsel balls like what come on Christmas trees.

Parked just inside the front of the tent is Pillpoot's canvas-hooded Conestoga wagon, painted a bright red that is dimmed considerable by traveling across the desert, with the words PILLPOOT & SON SHOOTING GALLERY painted in gold letters acrost the box, like a circus wagon.

The sheriff hears a chattering noise, and he hunkers down to look under the wagon. There between the wheels is a wooden-legged man wearing a long-tailed frock coat. He's busy feeding bananas to a monkey, said monkey being hitched to a bolster-rod with a piece of brass chain.

"Are you," speaks up the sheriff, "Pegleg Pillpoot?"

The man hands the monkey a banana, which it skins and chomps down before you can bat an eyelash, and turns around. Rimfire sees the man is wearing a pair of black spectacles.

"In person," he says, standing up and bracing his left elbow against the wagon box while he sticks his right hand out toward the sheriff. The hand is off at an angle, though, which indicates to Cudd that Pegleg Pillpoot is stone-blind.

"I'm the sheriff here in Apache," Cudd says importantly, glowering at the monkey while he shakes Pillpoot's hand. "If you wasn't blind and a cripple, I'd clap you in jail for fixing to swindle money under false pretenses in our mee-tropolis."

Pillpoot just smiles. Even Jub-Jub, the monk, lets out a sneering laugh, and then he gives a hop up to the wagon wheel, takes a good holt with his long toes, and reaches out and whips off the sheriff's Stetson.

Cudd bellers like a brimmer bull when Jub-Jub runs his hairy fingers over Cudd's head, hunting for fleas. The chimp gives up in disgust, though, chattering monkey cusswords when he discovers that Rimfire Cudd ain't got no more hair on his noggin than a spittoon has.

"A swindle? False pretenses?" repeats Pegleg, as the monkey flies through the air and lands astraddle of his shoulder. "And what would our esteemed minion of the law be insinuating by such harsh language as that, Jub-Jub?"

The monkey answered that one by peeling off Pillpoot's stovepipe hat, exposing a dome as bald and shiny as the sheriff's, and planting a big slobbery kiss on Pillpoot's left ear.

"Listen, Baldy!" the sheriff rips out, feeling superior because naturally Pillpoot can't see Cudd is a baldy too. "That billboard your kid is riggin' up outside says this gorilla of yours can shoot firearms. Any galoot knows that's a damn lie—besides bein' against the statutes. Or something."

Pillpoot ain't abashed by that. He

says something to Jub-Jub that sounds to Cudd like him and the monkey savvy the same lingo. Jub-Jub scratches his armpit and puckers his black lips.

"Jub-Jub can do anything a man can do," Pillpoot boasts. "We been touring through Arizona an' New Mexico an' Texas for going on ten year now. Nobody's shot as good a score as Jub-Jub, so far. Would you want him to demonstrate?"

Rimfire Cudd almost swallers his chaw while he's thinking that over. He sees Jub-Jub hop off Pillpoot's back and skin under the canvas wagon-hood. The monkey pops his head out of the oval opening in the back a minute later, and he's carrying a little nickel-plated .22 pistol in one hairy paw.

"Hey—don't point that pop-gun at me, you damn fool!" yowls the sheriff, backing off. Then he looks sheepish. "You mean that monkey can really handle a hawgleg?" he asks.

Just then the kid comes in, tossing his wooden mallet and some extry tent pegs into the Conestoga. "Of course he can shoot, sheriff!" pipes up the button indignantly. "We've got one thousand dollars cash that says he can out-shoot any gunnie you got in this flea-bit burg!"

Now Rimfire Cudd has got plenty of civic pride. He's not worth a plugged *peseta* when it comes to shooting hisself, but he realizes that Apache would be the laughingstock of Arizona Territory if any long-tailed critter like Jub-Jub was to come out ahead in a shooting match with a local citizen.

"I hope you got the thousand bucks with you this trip, Mister Pillpoot!" the sheriff says to the blind man, "because you're going to lose it. We got a man here in 'Pache who can out-shoot that monkey blindfolded!"

Pillpoot and his younker just laugh out loud and say nothing.

"Did you ever hear of Justin Other Smith?" Cudd asks.

Pillpoot looks vague, the way a blind man can. "Can't say as I have, Mister Sheriff. Lute and I have known lots of Smiths, so I guess we could have missed just another one."

Rimfire Cudd chortles kind of sly-like, and plays his ace. "Justin O. Smith," he says proudly, "happens to be the champeen shot west of the Pecos, in addition to being the best artist in the whole You-nighted States. The Paintin' Pistoleer, we call him. He'll give your monkey odds and rake in the pot!"

Pegleg Pillpoot reaches under the lapel of his black coat and fishes out a wallet. He thumbs out two $1,000 bills and waves them under the sheriff's nose—which ain't so much of a feat even for a blind man, as Rimfire's proboscis protrudes like the muzzle of a double-barrel shotgun anyhow.

"Put some money where your teeth are," challenges the shooting gallery man, "and we will double our offer. Jub-Jub has never been bested in a target match. Bring on your Paintin' Pistoleer, Mister Sheriff!"

Well, that made the sheriff see red. Two minutes later he was leading Pegleg Pillpoot out of the tent, and Pegleg was leading Jub-Jub on a leash. The kid, Lute, had fixed a little ten-gallon sombrero—only it was more of a ten-pint model—onto the monk's head with a rubber band, and had buckled a pair of ca'tridge belts around the monkey's little pot belly, with two holsters that carried a pair

of sawed-off .22 target pistols. Jub-Jub looked outer than a suckin' shoat in that git-up.

"Don't worry about Jub-Jub shooting anybody on the street," Lute assures the sheriff. "His guns ain't loaded except when he puts on his act here in the tent."

A crowd of miners had gathered in the alley to read the sign in front of the shooting gallery, and they rubbered and guffawed when they seed the sheriff escorting a blind man and a strutting monkey out of the tent.

Rimfire Cudd leads Pillpoot and Jub-Jub into the Longhorn Saddle Shop next door, and upstairs to where Justin O. Smith has his artist's studio.

But when the sheriff got up there, he found the Paintin' Pistoleer had gone out some place. The studio was all littered up with canvases on easels, and the walls was hung with paintings of desert scenery and snow-clad mountains and Injuns in war bonnets and cowboys on bucking bronchos and gorgeous sunsets. That Paintin' Pistoleer ain't no amachoor painter; his pictures circulate all over the country on calendars and mail-order catalogues and such-like.

"It's a pity you can't see," the sheriff remarks. "This Justin O. Smith can sling paint almost as good as he can shoot. And at shooting he is a champeen of which there ain't on whicher."

"Next to Jub-Jub," Pillpoot mutters smugly. "Jub-Jub can—"

"We'll cross over to the Bloated Goat Saloon," cuts in the sheriff. "I forgot it's three o'clock. That's when the Paintin' Pistoleer goes out for his glass of buttermilk."

So they traipse downstairs again, with Pillpoot's wooden leg thudding on the steps and Jub-Jub cartwheeling down the banister railing like some kind of hairy acrobat.

Quite a mob of kids foller them acrost the street, the monk screaming and spitting at them, and scaring hell out of a drunk cowpuncher who's got himself surrounded by a porch pillar. He figgers he's got delirium trimmin's for shore.

Sure enough, the Paintin' Pistoleer is at the brass rail, roundsiding with the miners and drinking his usual glass of buttermilk. You'd never know to look at Justin O. that he had been about dead with consumption when he first hit Apache two years before. The desert air had fixed him up so he was as husky as whangleather and about two shades browner.

The news of the shooting monkey had already got to Curly Bill's barroom, so a big crowd was on hand when the sheriff introduced Pillpoot and Jub-Jub to the Paintin' Pistoleer, basking in the reflected glory of these here celebrities.

Justin O., he takes a gander at the two $1,000 bills which Pillpoot shows him. Then he looks at the monkey, which has scrambled up on the mahogany and is slapping a bar rag at his reflection in the backbar mirror, his tail anchored around Curly Bill's skinny neck.

Smith listens to Pegleg's challenge, and shakes his head.

"You ain't yeller, are you?" says Lew Pirtle, the Overland Telegraph agent, in a sort of dismayed tone. "You ain't a-scairt of bein' beat by a bat-eared baboon, are you?"

Smith flushes at that. "No-o," he says in that soft Alabama drawl of

his, "but it wouldn't be right to take money from a—"

"From a blind man?" grins Pillpoot. "My friend, you are competing with Jub-Jub, not with me. This two thousand dollars represents only a small portion of my anthropoid's winnings. I assure you Jub-Jub can afford to gamble, since he never loses."

Well, the miners and cowpokes start hoorawing the Paintin' Pistoleer, and the upshot of it was that he scribbles off a check to cover Jub-Jub's bet and hands it to Jim Groot, the banker, who will hold the stakes. The next thing you know, every galoot who can crowd into the shooting-gallery tent has done so.

They all watch the blind man scramble up into the Conestoga and fetch a box of .22 shells, which he loads into the monkey's pistols. That makes a few of the boys nervous and they skin out, not wanting to be pinked by a bullet from no hairy ape, although Lute guarantees that Jub-Jub is never reckless with firearms.

"Oh, he's shot a few jackrabbits out on the open range, just to keep in practice," Lute admits, "but otherwise, Jub-Jub has been trained to shoot at just one thing—a bright red ball."

Well, the audience crowds back along the sides of the tent, while Lute sets up the targets. He puts a gunnysack loaded with sand on the shooting-gallery counter, and on the outside of this backstop he pins a couple dozen tinsel balls, the flimsy kind that come on Christmas trees.

These balls are in all colors—yeller, silver, blue, red, green, purple—with the red balls scattered around with the others.

"Okay," says Lute, when everything is ready. "Mister Smith, you will be allowed six shots—Jub-Jub the same. You will fire alternately, tossing for first turn. The bargain is that you are to shoot at any bulb *except* the red ones. Red is the only color Jub-Jub will shoot at. Is that understood?"

Well, that's fair enough. Justin O. Smith flips a coin with Jub-Jub, looking perty foolish. That is, the monkey flips the coin and the Paintin' Pistoleer calls it. He wins, and elects to shoot first, to show Jub-Jub the competition he's up against.

Justin O. is using his own gun, a .32 Colt on a .45 frame. It's quiet enough in the tent to hear a bumblebee belch when Justin O. takes his stance straddling the tongue of the Conestoga wagon. The tent is about 30 feet long, and the Christmas-tree balls are only an inch in diameter, which is a tolable small target even at that short range.

"I'll take the purple ball with the gold spots," Justin O. announces casual-like. Everybody's head cranks around to look at the sand bag and spot the target that the Pistoleer says he figgers to draw a bead on.

Without even lining his sights, Justin O. squeezes off a shot from the hip. The purple ball with the gold spots disappears with a little tinkling sound, and the crowd applauds. Even Jub-Jub claps his hands. Of course, nobody in Apache was surprised by that shooting; the Paintin' Pistoleer wasn't even warmed up yet. But what would Jub-Jub do?

Well, Lute, busy covering side bets with the customers, he gives the monkey a whistle signal. Pegleg Pillpoot is back inside the Conestoga hood, out of sight. The monkey clumb up onto

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the driver's seat and hauls a pistol from leather.

Jub-Jub juggles the .22 pistol in a kind of twirl around his long black finger, and it went off with a little popping sound in comparison to the roar of Justin O. Smith's Colt.

Rimfire Cudd squints up at the roof of the tent, expecting to see a bullet hole in the canvas. He has his mouth open to call a halt to the whole shebang as being a fraud and a dangerous thing for any bystander in range of that grey-eyed orangoutang.

But before the sheriff could yell, he seen the Paintin' Pistoleer's jaw drop open. Smith was a-starin' at the target, and lo and be-gosh, one of the red tinsel balls was busted to smithereeens! Jub-Jub had scored a clean bull's-eye.

"Your turn, Mister Smith!" sings out Lute Pillpoot from the sidelines. "The score is now even Stephen, one and one."

For the first time in his life, Justin O.'s gun-hand was trembling a little, and who could blame him. "The green-striped ball," he croaks out kind of hollow-like, and ears back the hammer of his Colt.

He pulls trigger. The crowd groans when it sees a silver-colored ball just above the green-striped one vanish in a puff of flying tinsel. Smith had aimed a hair too high.

"A miss!" calls Lute, inspecting the sandbag targets. "You're a crack shot, Mister Smith, but mebbe you'd better quit calling your shots— All right, Jub-Jub—take your second turn."

This time the monkey turns a summersault in mid-air, jumping off the wagon seat onto the whiffletrees and firing his .22 while he's whirling through space.

The crowd really went mad with excitement then, when they seen another red ball smashed by Jub-Jub's bullet. Men who had been busting themselves to place side bets with Lute began pulling back into their collars when Lute announced that the score now stood two to one—in Jub-Jub's favor!

Well, it was all over in a hurry. Justin O., looking kind of green around the gills, continued to call his shots regardless and even switched to his left hand for the next four tries, hitting the called target ball every crack.

But the monkey punched out four more red balls too, from a variety of damn-fool angles—hanging from his tail from the ridge pole of the tent and the like of that.

The crowd like to yelled its lungs out when they seen banker Jim Groot pass Smith's check up to Pegleg Pillpoot, who was leaning over the driver's seat of the wagon. Blind, he couldn't see the shooting, but he knew Jub-Jub had won from all the noise.

Pillpoot took the check and shook the Paintin' Pistoleer's hand, and even offered to give him back half the money because it was the closest Jub-Jub had ever come to losing, but of course that was adding insult to injury.

The Paintin' Pistoleer lurched out of the tent and went over to the Bloated Goat Saloon, looking sort of dazed. Curly Bill Grane who had locked up his place to attend the shooting-match, knew without asking that this was a special occasion when Justin O. needed something more fortifying than buttermilk, so he got out a bottle of Blue Bagpipe whisky and

poured Smith a long one, on the house. Smith needed it, that's for shore.

The miners plumb forgot their impatience about waiting for the payroll to show up, in discussing Smith's disgrace. They went over to Pillpoot's tent, aiming to try their own skill with the shooting-gallery's arsenal of .22's, but they had lost all their money to Lute and their credit was no good until the paymaster showed up. So Pillpoot cleared out the tent and said they would open for business later in the evening.

Pillpoot's kid went over to the Stockman's Bank and cashed Justin O. Smith's check, and along about sundown Pegleg went over to Dyspepsia Dan's restaurant to eat supper. He left Lute to watch the tent and take care of Jub-Jub. That's where Justin O. Smith found the kid when he went over to the shooting-gallery, Lute being busy lighting lanterns and hanging them from the ridge pole in preparation for the night's business.

"Jub-Jub beat me fair and square this afternoon," the Paintin' Pistoleer admits, game as they come. "Mind letting me look at his smoke-poles? I'm sort of interested in firearms."

Lute allowed that was okay, and when the Paintin' Pistoleer went back upstairs to where Rimfire Cudd and Sol Fishman were waiting in his art studio, he was shaking his head, looking plumb miserable and considerable perplexed.

"It don't stand to reason a monkey could shoot so accurate," he says, "but I could find no evidence of trickery. Jub-Jub's revolvers were regulation stock models and were loaded with standard .22 short ammunition. It beats hell out of me how a blind cripple could train a simian to shoot like that. Pillpoot could clean up a fortune in New York—"

Just then a yell went up from the street below and the sheriff and Sol Fishman hurried out, the news getting out that the Tucson stage was pulling in with the paymaster aboard.

The Paintin' Pistoleer, feeling down in the mouth and knowing his rep as a sharpshooting champ was blowed higher than a kite by this migratory monkey, strolls over to the window of his studio and watches the Concord pull up in front of the Wells-Fargo office.

It was pretty dark by then, but he saw Jake Grubb, wearing a red hunting-shirt and two six-guns, step off the coach with his briefcase full of greenbacks to pay off the miners.

The muckers were jostling each other for position in the payline over on the porch of the O.K. Mercantile, so nobody but Justin O. was paying much attention to Jake Grubb.

Justin O. watches the Syndicate man head for Sol Fishman's store. And then something happened. As Grubb was passing the alley between the Wells-Fargo office and the O.K. Mercantile, a club whizzed out of the shadows and caught Grubb on the head.

Grubb went down like a pole-axed steer on the board walk, and then a big hombre in batwing chaps and a black Mexican hat leaped out of the dark alley and yanked the payroll case out of Grubb's hand. In plain sight he angles across the street, sprinting like a turpentined terrier.

Justin O. Smith's mind worked like greased lightning then. He leaned out of the upstairs window and takes a

quick shot at the robber, who was wearing a bandanna mask over his face.

Jake Grubb staggered to his feet, rubbing his sore skull and yelling bloody murder. Then he dragged his two six-guns from leather and took off acrost the street after the bandit.

The holdup had happened so quick that nary a man had budged by the time the Paintin' Pistoleer got downstairs and headed into the alley where Grubb had chased the desperado. Lamplight from a saddle-shop window fell into the alley and as Justin O. Smith passed by, he seen a big black Mexican sombrero lyin' in the dust, with a bullet hole punched through the crown. He figgered that his snap-shot had knocked off the bandit's skypiece, anyhow.

By the time Smith reached the back of the saddle shop, all he could see was a trail of dust where Grubb had chased the payroll robber around the corner. The Paintin' Pistoleer cocked his .32 and headed in that direction, expecting all the time that the robber would veer off into the bull-tongue cactus patch, where he probably had a getaway horse stashed in the mesquite chaparral.

He was approaching the back end of Pillpoot's shooting-gallery tent when he heard a couple of shots inside. Smith lost a little time locating the fly in the back of the tent. When he finally clawed his way inside, he saw Jake Grubb sprawled over the counter where the Pillpoots had put the sand-loaded gunnysack for a backstop.

The Syndicate paymaster was dead as a tick dunked in sheep-dip. He still clutched his smoking .45's, but blood was leaking from a bullet hole in his red shirt, square over the heart. A little hole, the kind a .22 bullet would make, Smith saw at a glance.

The Paintin' Pistoleer looks around. The tent was brightly lighted by the ceiling lanterns, but it was deserted except for clouds of dust and gunsmoke. The payroll robber had ducked into the shooting-gallery and gone out the front way.

And then Justin O. Smith seen that the tent wasn't empty after all. Jub-Jub was chained to the wagon at the other end, and in his right paw was a smoking .22 pistol.

Lute had gone over to Dyspepsia Dan's to eat a snack of bait, so the Paintin' Pistoleer clambered up into the wagon and found a bunch of bananas. He swapped one of them for Jub-Jub's pistol. It had a fired shell in the breech.

Apache buzzed like a hornet's nest. Sheriff Rimfire Cudd showed up, late as usual, and listened to Justin O. Smith's story. Everybody come to the conclusion that the monkey had shot and killed the Syndicate paymaster.

"I can't jail a monkey," Cudd groaned, "but I can sure as blazes arrest Pillpoot for owning a dangerous animal—"

Well, Pegleg Pillpoot and his son Lute come back from Dyspepsia Dan's restaurant, and they carried on something fierce when they found out what their pet monkey had gone and done.

"Jub-Jub never done a thing like this before," Lute kept whimpering. "It was a case of monkey see, monkey do. Grubb was swapping shots with this robber, and Jub-Jub did like the robber did and took a shot at Grubb. That red shirt—Jub-Jub is used to shooting at red targets, you know—"

The whole town curried the 'squites

for a trace of the missing robbers, but by midnight they hadn't turned up so much as a set of tracks. The miners were hopping mad over losing their pay, especially to a robber who was most likely a cowboy; but at the same time public opinion was dead set agin Sheriff Cudd arresting a poor blind cripple for something his pet monkey had done.

Jub-Jub would have to be destroyed, of course, but that wouldn't help solve the mystery. After all, Pegleg Pillpoot and his whelp had to eat supper; you couldn't blame them for leaving the monkey on a leash inside the tent out of harm's way.

It was a little after midnight when the Paintin' Pistoleer mosied into the shooting-gallery tent where Pillpoot and his son Lute was hugging and kissing poor Jub-Jub good-by before Rimfire Cudd had to lead it out into the chaparral and kill it.

Justin O. Smith was carrying the Mexican sombrero he had shot off the robber's head earlier in the evening. "Look inside this hat, Sheriff," the artist says in that easy-going Alabama drawl of his. "Notice anything peculiar?"

Cudd looks, but aside from the bullet hole in the peak, he allowed the Mexican hat had no identifying marks in it, no initials in the sweatband or anything.

"No hairs, either," Justin O. points out. "An ordinary hombre sheds hair inside a sweaty beaver hat like this one. The robber's head was as bald as a peeled onion, you can bank on that."

Then Justin O. did a funny thing. Quick-like, he reached out and jerked the black specs off Pegleg Pillpoot's eyes. Pillpoot blinked twice, and then Justin O. hauled off and clipped him an uppercut on the jaw that laid Pillpoot out alongside the wagon tongue, cold as a fish.

"Hey!" bellers Lute. "You can't slug a blind man—"

The sheriff was about to holler at Justin O. likewise, but the Paintin' Pistoleer was squatting down beside Pillpoot and pulling back his frock coat. That was when the sheriff seen that Pillpoot's left leg wasn't missing at all, but was just doubled back and strapped to his thigh, with a fake wooden pegleg buckled to the knee, the whole hoax hidden by Pillpoot's long coat.

"There's your thief, Sheriff," Justin O. says calm-like. "And that ain't all I got to show you." With which the Paintin' Pistoleer clambers up into the wagon box and comes out with a B-B air rifle mounted on a tripod.

"The monkey was shooting blank shells," Justin O. explains to the goggle-eyed sheriff, "while Pillpoot, who ain't any more blind than you are, plugged those red balls with this noiseless air rifle, from inside the Conestoga where nobody could see him. A B-B shot could bust a tinsel ball as easy as a real slug. I noticed this B-B gun earlier in the evening when I was hunting up a banana for Jub-Jub. When I seen Pillpoot's pupils react to the light after I whupped off his specs, I knew my hunch was okay."

Afterward Smith found Jake Grubb's payroll case stuffed inside the sandbag backstop, where he was putting it when Grubb caught him. Pillpoot had handed his smoking .22 to the monkey as an alibi, along with his fake pegleg and blindness. The gunnysack revealed a lot of B-B shot,

which Lute confessed was the secret of Jub-Jub's so-called shooting ability.

Anyway, the miners got their pay and Rimfire Cudd clapped Pillpoot in jail, hogging all the credit for the arrest, as usual. It turns out that Lute wasn't Pillpoot's kid, but a orphant who was forced to work for this swindler, so he was let off.

The whole town trooped over to the Bloated Goat around daylight to see Jub-Jub put on another show. The Paintin' Pistoleer had found out that Jub-Jub liked whisky, and he poured Blue Bagpipe down the simian's gullet until the poor monk was plastered tighter than wallpaper.

Having got back his $2,000 Justin O. could afford to feed Jub-Jub imported Scotch, although Curly Bill Grane allowed it was degrading for such monkey-business to go on inside a high-toned establishment like the Bloated Goat.

Could be.

HOW DID THEY SPELL LION?

CURLY BILL, the famous Arizona outlaw, practically owned the town of Galeyville. It was his headquarters for a number of years, most of its inhabitants were members of Curly Bill's murderous gang, and the sheriff of Cochise County didn't even dare enter Galeyville with a posse to collect taxes. It was one tough town, and the residents told with pride the following story, probably apocryphal:

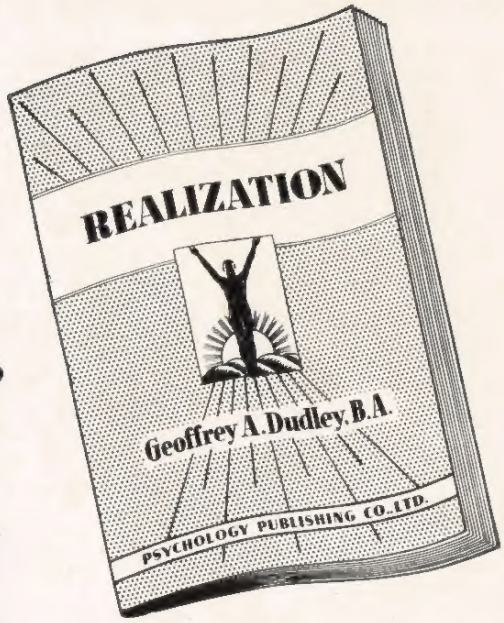
The citizens of Tucson were startled out of their torpor one blazing-hot summer day when a cloud of dust at the edge of town heralded the rapid approach of a rider. The cloud rolled down the main street and the figure of the rider became visible—a giant of a man with a fierce black beard. He was mounted upon the biggest Mexican mountain lion anyone had ever seen, and the poor beast was covered with lather as the giant urged it on by quirting its flanks with a live six-foot diamond-back rattlesnake.

Reining to a halt before a drugstore, the rider entered and in a terrible voice ordered a pint of carbolic acid. As the curious but apprehensive citizens gathered around, the bearded giant drank off the liquid at a single draught, exhaled a great sigh of satisfaction that rattled the windows, and began to munch on the bottle.

One of the braver of those who watched this amazing exhibition finally gathered his courage and spoke: "Excuse me, stranger, but would you mind telling us where you're headed for in such a all-fired hurry?"

The giant looked down at him, then with a shudder pointed back in the direction from which he had come. "Any place but there," he boomed. "I'm gettin' away from Galeyville as fast as I can. Them sonsabitches back there are too tough for me!"

—CARL W. SMITH



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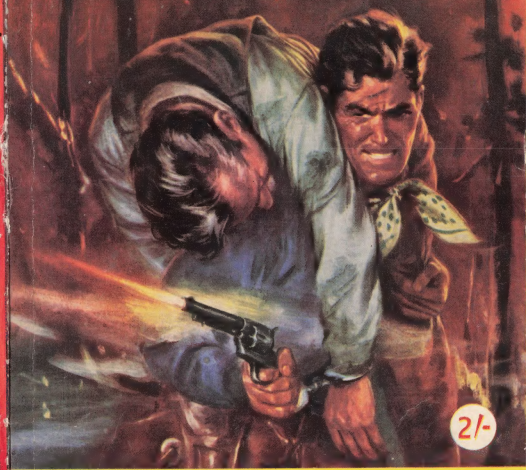

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